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DAN DILLON, King of Crosscut; or, A Woman's Wild Work.

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "OLD GABE," "TERRAPIN DICK," "FLUSH FRED," "MONTANA NAT," "BILL, THE BLIZZARD," ETC., ETC.



THE BEAUTIFUL PRISONER STARTED, TREMBLED VISIBLY, AND HER FACE TURNED ASHY PALE. WAS IT FROM CONSCIOUS GUILT OF A HORRIBLE CRIME?

Dan Dillon, KING OF CROSSCUT;

OR,

A Woman's Wild Work.

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CHAPTER I.

"HERE SHE COMES!"

THERE were wild times at Crosscut.

Not wilder, perhaps, than had frequently been known there before; but the circumstances were so novel and peculiar that the citizens of Crosscut were highly excited.

Crosscut was then a thriving town. It had become the shipping point of an extensive cattle trade, and consequently a head-quarters for cowboys, ranchers, speculators, Eastern buyers, and all sorts of herders and handlers of cattle.

Business was booming, especially the trade of liquor selling and the employment of gambling, and new buildings were going up so rapidly that the town had begun to present quite a substantial appearance.

Among the recent improvements were a bank, a newspaper office, a jail, and a church.

The church had already ceased to be a novelty; and the jail was well patronized; for Ike Nevins had accepted the position of city marshal, and he attended without fear or favor to the business of keeping order.

On the occasion referred to the liquor trade was unusually thriving, as the prevailing excitement caused the Crosscutters to tend toward the saloons with even more than ordinary unanimity.

The circumstances that caused the excitement were, as has been said, novel and peculiar.

There had been arrested on the Southern emigrant trail a young woman—usually mentioned in Crosscut as a girl, though she was known to be married—charged with the secret and shocking murder of her husband.

Her husband was an elderly man of considerable wealth, named Josiah Seaver, who was well known in Crosscut.

Though his personal appearance and qualities were not attractive, he had been more or less of a favorite in that vicinity, where he had been a successful rancher for several years, and he had acquired the reputation of being a square and straightforward man, fairly inclined to be liberal.

His wife was then known as Effie Seaver, and she had not hitherto been seen in Crosscut.

The marriage and the ensuing circumstances were so peculiar that it seemed, in view of the sequel, as if they must actually have led to the tragedy that was exciting Crosscut.

Josiah Seaver had married her in St. Louis, whither he had gone for that purpose, at her command. She had returned with him, but only a part of the way, having stopped at a station east of Crosscut.

He had gone on to his ranch, where he had a large drove of sheep which he was intending to take to Texas, and had prepared for his journey southward. His preparations were made as speedily as possible, and he was naturally anxious to rejoin his young wife, who was to meet him on the way.

To none of his friends and neighbors did he explain why his bride had been unwilling to accompany him to Crosscut, being reticent on that point when questioned. He had left his ranch with the sheep and two herders and a driver, and the next thing heard of the outfit was the report, brought into Crosscut by a party of movers from below, that the old man was dead, and that the movers, who had met his wife and heard the particulars of his death as she related them, were strongly inclined to believe that she had killed him.

Crosscut jumped at once to the same conclusion, and insisted upon an immediate and thorough investigation of the mysterious affair.

Ike Nevins, always prompt and active, who had been the old man's particular friend, was more than willing to do his part in bringing the supposed guilty party to justice. So he started southward at once, with two deputy-marshals, the three men well-mounted and well-armed.

Word was soon brought to Crosscut, by a citizen who arrived from that quarter, to the effect that the redoubtable Ike Nevins had captured the entire Seaver outfit, and was bringing it back.

The sheep, the wagon and oxen, the two herders and the driver were hourly expected to reach the town in charge of the marshal.

The woman, also.

It was the expected arrival of the woman that had excited and demoralized Crosscut.

Though the town then boasted of a bank, a newspaper, a church, and a jail, it had not yet outgrown its primitive customs and proclivities.

The idea of executing summary justice upon all manner of criminals, instead of waiting for the slow process of the law, was still uppermost in the minds of the people.

The generally expressed intention was that the murderess, on her arrival, should be tried by a committee of citizens, and, if she should be found guilty, should be severely dealt with.

It is probable that the idea of such a summary proceeding would not have taken so strong a hold upon the minds of the Crosscutters in their sober moments—that the idea of practicing lynch law upon a woman would have been repugnant to them.

But they were not sober then—they were wild.

There were several sufficient reasons for the wildness that seized them.

Josiah Seaver had been a highly respected resident of the Crosscut region, and most of them were personally acquainted with him.

Moreover, he was what the Crosscutters called "an old man."

His young wife was far from being a favorite there, because she had treated Crosscut with contempt, and that was an offense which could not readily be forgiven.

She had refused to show her face in the town, and therefore she must be held to have scorned it, or to have had reasons which she was ashamed or afraid to make known.

Such a woman could not expect to find any sympathy in Crosscut.

If she had murdered the old man, according to the story brought by the party of movers, she must have committed the crime for the meanest of motives.

She had murdered him for his money.

She had married him for his property, and had killed him in order that she might more quickly and more surely come into possession of it.

The feelings generated by these causes were encouraged and increased by the efforts of a number of cowboys and ranchmen, formerly employed by Josiah Seaver, who, whether their emotion was real or simulated, seemed to take his death greatly to heart.

Thus it happened that there were wild times in Crosscut; that the saloons were doing a rushing business, and that the Crosscutters were bent on taking the law into their own hands.

Such was the condition of affairs when a cry was raised at the southern edge of the town, which was taken up and repeated until it reached the heart of the settlement.

The burden of the cry was, "Here she comes!"

CHAPTER II.

THE KING OF CROSSCUT.

THERE was one person in Crosscut who could have told why Effie Seaver had refused to visit that town.

The person was Dan Dillon, well known in that region as the King of Crosscut.

He was a young man, not yet thirty, and was the proprietor of the finest saloon in the town.

That saloon was a splendid affair for the time and place—elegant, rather than showy—with accommodations for all kinds of drinking and various varieties of gambling.

Financially considered, it was the most prosperous establishment in Crosscut, well ahead of the bank, far in advance of the newspaper, and vastly beyond the church.

Dan Dillon was consequently a well-to-do and influential personage, as the King of Crosscut ought to be.

But he had acquired that title before he arrived at his present monetary eminence. He had gained it by the successful manner in which he "ran the town" in the "early days"—hardly more than a year ago—before Crosscut had arisen from the condition of a "camp" to the proud position of a city.

The title had stuck to him as civilization advanced and order was established, and he had continued to deserve it by his brilliant career as a saloonist and his influence in the politics of Crosscut and elsewhere.

It was he who had sent Harry Bayne to Congress as the delegate of the Territory, and it was he who was responsible for the appointment of Ike Nevins as city marshal and for that gentleman's acceptance of the position.

He had given his saloon no fancy or high-flown name to captivate the crowd—he was too "tony" for that—but the Crosscutters had so generally agreed to style it the Throne, that the name might as well have been put over the door, instead of the simple "Dan Dillon" which occupied that position.

The Throne was of course extensively patronized during the afternoon which witnessed the culmination of the excitement in Crosscut.

The bar-room was crowded with citizens of all qualities and calibers, who were continually demanding drinks, while they volubly discussed the reported murder of old man Seaver and the expected arrival of his murderess.

All were anxious to know what Dan had to say on the subject; but their anxiety was not satisfied.

As has been remarked, he might have told the cause of Effie Seaver's unwillingness to appear in Crosscut; but he had never condescend-

ed to explain it, and it was only to his most special and intimate friend, and at the time of the excitement, that he gave as much as a hint of it.

Mr. Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton, the editor of the Crosscut *Crusher*, had been interviewing the magnates of the town, including the banker and the preacher, to get their opinions concerning the recent and prospective events in connection with the reported murder.

As the *Crusher* was but a weekly paper, and was to appear the next morning, it was necessary that he should get up as much sensational matter as possible, as a prelude to the exciting event which he hoped to chronicle.

It was above all things important that he should be able to inform the public what the King of Crosscut had to say, and he had prepared a series of questions that would draw out the views of that personage upon the subject in all its bearings.

But he was no more successful than the portion of the public that had already been disappointed in endeavoring to get that news for itself.

The King of Crosscut was invisible to all outsiders.

He had scarcely shown himself in his bar-room during the prevalence of the excitement, and when he did appear he was moody, silent, and unapproachable.

When spoken to upon the all-absorbing subject, he had given inquirers not the slightest satisfaction.

As the excitement grew hotter he had withdrawn entirely from the crowd, and was closeted in an upper rear room of his establishment with the special and intimate friend who has been mentioned.

That friend was Bart Scammell, known to the Crosscutters as Baby Bart, or Bart the Baby, doubtless because he was such a big, brawny, double-fisted style of a man.

Bart was the manager of the gambling department attached to Dan Dillon's saloon, and was supposed to be a partner in the enterprise.

In that capacity he was invaluable, being an adept in the business who knew how to circumvent all manner of sports and capture their dollars, as well as a person who was able to maintain order under the most exasperating circumstances, by force if necessary.

The only objection to Bart as a business man was his occasional unreliability, which was caused by his drinking proclivities.

He was afflicted with sprees that were strictly periodical.

As a general thing he was tetotally sober, never drinking a drop when he was "on deck;" but now and then he would abandon everything, and would not be seen at the Throne for a week or more.

During that period he might be found at any other place where liquor was to be had, testing to the utmost his capacity to hold whisky, and remaining quietly, stupidly and continually drunk.

At the end of his whirl he would return to Dan Dillon's, dilapidated but sober, and would pick up the thread of his usual life where he had dropped it.

Dan overlooked these eccentricities because of the useful and reliable nature of the man in his sober seasons.

Baby Bart had befriended Dan in the past, and his intelligence and faithfulness had been fully proved on many occasions.

The matter with him was that he could manage anything but himself.

This was the individual with whom the King of Crosscut was closeted when the public desired to get hold of him.

Dan Dillon, as has been said, was a young man, and he might also be fairly termed a handsome one. Exactly six feet high in his stocking feet, he was perfectly formed, with fine features, and his bearing was erect, and his manners were usually attractive. His hair was raven black and not worn too long, and his eyes were large and dark, and he wore a heavy black mustache, and the expression of his countenance spoke of intelligence, vigor, and determination.

He dressed usually in business suits of the finest material and latest styles that could be procured, his only relic of the "early days" of Crosscut being the high boots into which his trousers were carefully tucked.

Dan Dillon and Bart Scammell were talking about business matters only.

They were overhauling account-books, running up columns, figuring on sheets of paper, and discussing various matters connected with the affairs of the saloon and outside enterprises.

It might have seemed to a keen observer that Dan was devoting himself to those accounts with the object of diverting his mind from troublesome thoughts of other things.

That was doubtless the opinion of Bart, as he shoved the books and papers aside at last, leaned back in his chair, and regarded his companion with a curious gaze.

"You don't seem," said he, "to take any interest in the big excitement outside."

"That's so," quietly answered Dan.

"It is queer that you don't. You are always

bound to be top of the heap when anything of the kind is going on—the biggest toad in the puddle, as I may say. It is strange that you don't take any sort of interest in the woman who killed old man Seaver."

"How do you know that I don't?" demanded Dan.

"You admitted as much to me just now when I spoke to you about it."

"You are making a bit of a mistake there, pard, I admitted that I didn't *seem* to take any interest in the affair. If it looks that way to you, I am satisfied, as that is what I want the crowd to think. But it is likely, Bart, that I take a stronger interest in the woman than any man in Crosscut."

"You do? It is astonishing how much you don't show it."

"Don't want to show it. Got good reasons of my own for keeping it to myself. And what I tell you, Bart, mustn't go any further."

"Not an inch," responded Bart.

"You remember, old pard, that you and the rest of them wondered why old Seaver didn't bring his wife on to Crosscut after he had married her."

"Not just that. We knew that it was because she refused to come here."

"Then you wondered *why* she refused to come. The reason was, Bart, that she knew that I was here."

"So you knew her?"

"Considerably. A little too well. Bart, I was once engaged to be married to that woman."

"Great snakes! And she went back on you, and married that old man for his money?"

"We won't go into particulars just now. She didn't marry me for my money, and I am alive, and— What's that, Bart?"

There was a yell down the street, growing louder and plainer, as it reached up into town, and the burden of the cry was, "Here she comes!"

CHAPTER III.

THE WOMAN IN THE CASE.

As the commotion outside increased, Dan Dillon rose from his chair deliberately, examined the revolvers in the belt under his coat, and left the room.

Baby Bart followed his friend down-stairs, after carefully locking the door of the room they had occupied.

The bar-room was nearly deserted when the two men came down; but their appearance caused much excitement among the few citizens who remained.

Dan passed through without speaking, and stepped outside.

The sight of his handsome face and commanding figure at the front of the saloon raised a fresh tumult among the crowd in the street.

That crowd was a big one—as big as the town had as yet ever furnished.

It seemed as if every citizen of Crosscut, as well as a large portion of the population of the surrounding country, must be out there in that street, and it was a strange and motley crowd.

With the bankers, merchants, gamblers, and other business men of the city, were gathered cowboys from the southern trail, ranchmen from the neighboring stock farms, miners from the hills, railroad hands, Chinamen, idlers and bummers—all classes of the community except the barkeepers, whose serious and responsible duties would not allow them to leave their posts.

The appearance of the King of Crosscut caused a general outcry from the crowd, and a number of shouts were addressed to him personally.

"Here he is, boys! Here's Dan Dillon at last!"

"Of course he is. Ever know him to git left? Always on hand when in demand."

"She's comin', Dan! She'll be here right soon now, and we'll tend to her case so quick it'll make her head swim."

"Hello, Dan! Where've you been all this while. The committee is ready for business, and you are Number One."

"Come on, Dan. We're goin' to stop her right here, and that'll make business good for you. Come and take the lead!"

Such were some of the shouts, mingled with discordant cries and yells and whoops, that greeted the King of Crosscut as he stepped out in front of his saloon.

He spoke, not loudly, but so clearly and distinctly that his voice reached over and through the entire crowd.

"Boys, I thought you knew Dan Dillon. If you think that I am going to take a hand in lynching a woman, you are mistaken in the man!"

A sudden hush came upon the crowd, followed by a confused murmur, audible enough, but indistinct.

It was as if the shock of an earthquake had suddenly sobered a party of roysterers.

The unexpected had occurred.

Dan Dillon, who had always been foremost in similar scenes of excitement, prompt to make the punishment of red-handed crime swift and strong, had set himself in opposition to the almost universal sentiment of Crosscut.

Since the receipt of the news he had been singularly silent, and no person had pretended to explain his silence.

Now he had come out, squarely and flat-footed, against the summary proceedings upon which the crowd had determined.

But his strange and unpopular position was not to pass unchallenged. The tide that had been setting so strongly in one direction during the greater part of the day was not to be so suddenly and easily turned.

The murmur that followed his brief remark meant displeasure at the stand he had taken, if not actual revolt.

In the crowd there were men who wanted to know what he meant, and how far he was inclined to go in opposition to the will of the mass.

"We don't understand this at all, Mr. Dillon. What does it mean?" demanded the editor of the *Crusher*, who had crowded himself close to the King of Crosscut, and stood there with his pencil and paper out, ready to take down every word that fell from the lips of the magnate.

"What's up, Dan?" roared Buck Tremper, the political war-horse of Crosscut, and a close ally of Dan Dillon. "What's got into you, old pard? You never went back on the boys before. Are you going to do it now?"

The King of Crosscut spoke again.

"We know nothing about this business except from *hearsay*. We had better wait and get the rights of it before we make up our minds. The girl may be as innocent as any of us. Anyhow, she is entitled to a fair trial and every chance to clear herself. And a woman is a woman."

This speech elicited signs of approval, as well as of disapproval, and it was evident that at least a respectable minority favored Dan Dillon's views of the affair.

But, those who held the other view were louder and more in earnest, as well as more numerous.

Doubtless an exciting discussion would have ensued, which might have led to bloodshed, had it not been for the arrival of the object of the contention.

"Here she is!" was the cry that arose on the outskirts of the crowd, and there was an immediate break to see her.

Dan Dillon pushed through the throng, which readily made way for him.

They wanted to see what he was going to do, as the excitement centered in him at the moment quite as much as in the woman.

He had declared himself as opposed to the purpose of the majority, and nobody believed for a moment that his opposition would be merely negative, or would amount to nothing but words.

He was accustomed to backing his opinion with his acts, and that was what he was expected to do on this occasion.

It was somewhat of a procession that marched up the main street of Crosscut into the midst of the waiting crowd.

At the front rode Ike Nevins and a woman, side by side.

After them came a Mexican and two Americans—a man and a lad—also on horseback, guarded by the mounted deputy-marshals.

The city marshal was a small and wiry man, tough as a pine knot, bronzed and heavily bearded, his flashing eyes shaded by a slouched felt hat, with a quiet and unconcerned demeanor that seemed to make no account of the crowd.

The woman, upon whom all eyes were instantly turned, was well worth their eager and inquisitive gaze.

She seemed to be a little above the medium height of her sex, and presented a most attractive appearance as she rode, sitting her horse perfectly and holding herself erect, as if she were the queen of the crowd.

She was dressed richly and even elegantly, wearing a wine-colored silk, with solitaire diamonds pendent from her ears, and a velvet hat with feathers of a lilac hue.

Her small hands were neatly gloved, and her dainty feet, one of which was easily visible as she rode, were exquisitely shod.

But her face was closely covered with a veil, which permitted not a feature to be seen, and this naturally disappointed the citizens of Crosscut.

Seeing so much, they were crazy to see more. They crowded in front of the procession, blocking the street so that it was obliged to come to a halt. Some of them seized the bridles of the horses on which the marshal and the woman were mounted, thus bringing the affair to a crisis.

It was a splendid reception to the new-comers—or would have been, were it not for the hostile intentions of the mob.

"What do you mean, boys?" quietly asked Ike Nevins, though he well knew the meaning of the demonstration.

"We want that woman," answered Buck Tremper, in his stentorian tones. "We mean to settle with her for the murder of old man Seaver; and are ready to try her right now."

A chorus of yells attested the purpose and vigor of the war-horse's backers.

Ike Nevins was in no hurry to say anything;

but he had a way of smiling that meant mischief.

It was the woman who made the first demonstration on that side of the house.

As soon as the hostile object of the citizens was declared, she raised her veil and looked at the crowd.

The effect upon her enemies was electrical.

They saw before them a most lovely vision of a woman, with a face so childlike and innocent that it would be hard to suspect her of anything unbecoming an angel.

Her features were regular, and her complexion was clear and of almost a milky whiteness, with a faint tinge of color in her cheeks.

The hair that had escaped from under her hat and fallen down upon her shoulders was of a silken fineness, and of a bright and rich golden hue.

It was more than matched by her eyes, large orbs of perfect azure, ivory-lidded, and fringed with long golden lashes.

These details added largely to the impressiveness of the expression of that lovely countenance as she gazed at the crowd.

It was beseeching, but trustful—tenderly sorrowful, but childishly confident—and out of each eye had stolen a crystal tear, plainly visible in the bright daylight.

The vision was too much for the men of Crosscut.

They dropped the bridles of the horses, fell back respectfully, and stared in mute admiration at Effie Seaver, the supposed murderess.

There was not a man among them at that moment who would not have gone to any lengths to serve her.

Except one, perhaps.

That one was Dan Dillon, who had turned from her when she raised her veil, edging his way back to his saloon.

She spoke, and her clear and sweet voice finished the effect which the sight of her face had begun.

"I am accused of a horrible crime, and have come here to face my accusers. I am sure that the liberal and whole-souled men of Crosscut will give me a fair chance to clear myself of the charge."

There could be no doubt at the moment that they would—that it was just what they were anxious to do, above everything else.

Ike Nevins was quick to take advantage of their change of temper.

"I reckon this funeral had better move on," he remarked.

"It had better move on," responded Dan Dillon from the porch of his saloon.

As he spoke, the glance of Effie Seaver rested on the speaker.

She saw the tall and handsome young man standing under his name, "Dan Dillon," which was blazoned in bright letters on the front of the building, and her countenance suddenly changed.

"Dan Dillon!"

The beautiful prisoner started, trembled visibly, and her face turned ashy pale. Was it from conscious guilt of a horrible crime?

Then she dropped her veil, and the procession moved on.

"Be sure, Ike, that you keep her safe," Buck Tremper ventured to suggest.

"Reckon I know my business," was the marshal's surly reply, as he quickened the pace of his horse.

When Effie Seaver had moved on toward the jail, and the spell which she had cast upon the crowd was gradually losing its effect, they began to be angry with themselves and with each other.

They were then so completely ashamed of their backdown that a few cowboys strove to start up the excitement again, and to persuade them to follow the procession and capture it; but that fire had been quenched, and the turbulent spirits were soon subdued.

The crowd dispersed into the saloons, or to their homes or places of business, and not even a sporadic fight disturbed the quiet that settled upon Crosscut.

Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton, editor of the *Crusher*, sadly wended his way to his office, to "kill" an editorial on the subject which he already had in type, and when his paper appeared the next morning it was not near as sensational and attractive as he had intended it should be.

CHAPTER IV.

DAN'S LOVE STORY.

DAN DILLON went into his saloon, followed by Bart Scammell, and the former took a bottle of wine to his room, to wet his whistle while he told his friend of his acquaintance with the woman who had just astonished an electrified Crosscut.

The story that he told was substantially this:

A little less than two years ago he had emigrated from Missouri to Denver, where he opened a law office, intending to begin there the practice of the profession to which he had been educated.

He was young, poor, and unknown, but had plenty of hope and ambition.

One night he went to the theater to witness the performance of a so-called opera company

from the East. The opera was the lightest of the light; the voices of the singers were phenomenally thin; the orchestra was scanty, and the only attractiveness about the performance was that of the persons of the female artists, whose good looks and winning ways were supposed to atone for all the artistic shortcomings of the troop.

They did so atone, in Dan's opinion—at least, one of them did.

That one was one of the principal performers—Effie Harris on the bills—who was beautiful enough, Dan thought, to make the fortune of any such company, even if she was unable either to sing or to act.

She was doubtless a woman grown, but with such a childlike face and manner, that she seemed to be only a young girl.

Dan Dillon fell deeply, intensely, madly in love with her at once.

The remaining three nights of the company's stay found him at the theater, gazing only at her, his love growing as he gazed.

He sought to form her acquaintance, but was unable to do so in Denver, and followed the company to the next town.

There they had only a one night stand, and he was again disappointed; but he went on to the next town, where he succeeded.

Effie had already noticed him in the audiences, and was quite willing to see him when he besought an interview.

The interview increased and intensified the young man's infatuation.

She was even more beautiful, in his opinion, off the stage than on it.

Her face was yet more innocent and childlike, and her manners were so simply trustful and guileless, uncontaminated by contact with her surroundings, that she seemed to him a being formed to be loved and protected.

Abandoning his business—laying aside all other hopes and aspirations—he followed her from town to town, through Kansas and into Missouri, until he became well known to the members of the company, who familiarly spoke of him as "Effie's mash."

For her part, she could not help admiring the tall and handsome young man, so intelligent and so ardent, who lavished his worship upon her, and more than once she half-confessed an affection for him.

Doubtless she did love him, as much as she could love any one man, and there was but one consideration that prevented her from marrying him.

He was poor, and she was not slow to discover that material fact.

This obstacle cropped out in Sedalia.

At that town, as he was running short of funds, and would not be able to follow the company much further, Dan brought the affair to a crisis by asking Effie to become his wife.

She received the proposition coolly, and considered it in quite a matter-of-fact manner.

"I feel immensely flattered, Dan," said she. "More than that, I am vastly pleased that you have made the offer, because it proves that you really love me, and I am ever so glad to be loved by you. I am very fond of you, too, and don't believe I could ever be fonder of anybody. I would be glad to marry you, Dan, if you had money; but you are poor, you know."

"I had not supposed that you were looking out for a rich husband," said Dan.

"I have only myself to take care of myself, and so I must look out for myself, and not throw myself away."

"No doubt you are right about that. But I can make money, Effie. I think I have as much capacity that way as most men, if I set myself at it. I hope you will not want me to be a millionaire."

"Oh, no. I think I am reasonable in my wants. If you could take me off the stage, and give me a good home, which I could be sure to keep, that would be nice. It would be better yet if you had money enough to start me as a star. That would suit me exactly."

"How much would I need?"

"Five thousand dollars would do, and you could be my manager."

"I will get it, Effie. How soon will you want it?"

"Next fall we will open the season in St. Louis. If you will meet me there, and if you then have that amount of money, I will marry you, and then will go starrng, and you shall be my manager."

"It is a bargain. Next fall, Effie, I shall claim your promise."

They parted as an engaged couple, and Dan Dillon set himself at work to get possession of five thousand dollars.

It was idle for him to think of accumulating that amount in the practice of the law, and a quicker scheme was necessary.

He went to St. Louis, procured a loan from a relative there, and began to speculate in grain.

He lost at first in the grain gambling business, and then met with ups and downs that were very unsatisfactory, but finally struck a streak of luck that brought him the required five thousand dollars and a little more.

Then he stopped, and waited for Effie.

When she came to St. Louis he hastened to

claim the fulfillment of her promise, but found her cool and hesitating.

She admitted that she loved him and would be glad to marry him, but doubted if he had money enough for her purpose, as her ambition had risen since she saw him last.

He offered to get more money; but she still hesitated, and kept putting him off.

One day when he called on her he found her parting from a man on the shady side of fifty.

When the visitor had gone away, Dan wanted to know who he was.

"That is Mr. Seaver, a wealthy gentleman from the West," Effie answered.

"What has he to do with you?"

"He is to be my husband. I intend to marry him."

This sudden and entirely unexpected blow nearly knocked Dan Dillon down.

When he recovered from the shock he was wild with rage, which he carefully repressed.

She had quickly become in his eyes so slight and worthless a thing that his anger would be wasted on her.

"I suppose he has more money than I have," he simply remarked.

"Oh, ever so much more."

"I hope you are sure that there is no mistake about his money."

"I have looked into his references, and it is all just so. He has already given me a big farm and I have the deed, and a lawyer has examined the title for me."

"When is the marriage to take place?"

"Before long. Mr. Seaver must first go to the West and settle up his business there. Then he will come here and marry me. After that we are to go to Texas to live. But remember, Dan, that I love you just the same, and always shall, and you must let me hear from you, and I will tell you where I am, so that you can find me, and—"

"Not that!" he interrupted. "Don't say that! It will be bad enough to remember you as heartless and mercenary, without being obliged to think of you as—as—anything worse. Good-by!"

"Dan Dillon, what do you mean? Wait!" But he was gone.

CHAPTER V.

HOW HE BECAME THE KING.

It was the old story, the same that has been told so often, but is always something new to the man to whom it happens.

It was new to Dan Dillon, and the blow was a terrible one; but he survived the shock, and endured his disappointment fairly well, considering the circumstances.

He lived a fast life for a while, and spent his money lavishly, but soon recovered from that sort of demoralization, and began to consider his future.

It seemed to him just then that the one important thing for a man in this world was to be rich.

Riches had robbed him of his sweetheart, and she was now nothing but a memory to him—a memory, it must be admitted, that was somewhat unsavory.

Whether the ends he aimed at were those of love or of ambition, it was necessary to be rich, and the basis of all his aspirations must be the possession of money.

So he set himself at work to reach the goal of riches, not caring how rough or laborious the course might be, but anxious only to choose the shortest route and to act upon the principle of "get there."

Large cities had become distasteful to him, and the law was too slow a business, and his taste of grain gambling had given him an appetite for more excitement of the same sort.

He struck out for the wild West, and was stranded on the rocky shore of Crosscut, which was then in its chrysalis condition as a "camp."

Dan had theretofore boasted, with a fair show of reason, of his prowess as a card-player, and he plunged into the business of winning other people's money with the ardor of a tyro who believes himself to be an adept.

He plunged into deeper water than he expected to find.

The card sharps of that locality, which had gathered to itself the brainiest and nerviest of the gambling profession, sailed into him, and they easily played on him all the tricks, of the trade, the stale ones as well as the fresh ones.

He ran the gantlet of "brace" games, "skin" games, and "quiet" games, and came out badly worsted.

He soon discovered that it was necessary to play with a revolver as well as with a "deck," to become noted for his ability to shoot straight as well as to handle his cards deftly.

This reputation he achieved by shooting a sharper who was endeavoring to cheat him most shamefully and openly.

The lie passed, and pistols were drawn, and Dan laid his adversary out cold.

After that men were not so ready to impose upon him, and he had a better show.

But he still lost more frequently than he won, and his capital dwindled until there was precious little of it left,

It was then that Bart Scammell came to his rescue.

Baby Bart was recovering from one of his worst periodicals, and was in a most forlorn and forsaken condition—dilapidated, demoralized, and dead broke.

In Crosscut at that period a man who was sick might as well be dead, especially if he happened to be poor.

Bart was sick, very sick, alone, friendless and neglected, when Dan Dillon found him.

Dan, actuated by feelings of pure compassion, at once established himself in charge of the sick man, and tended him, cared for him, and spent his time and money on him, until the patient rose up, ready and eager to take a hand in the game of life.

Bart was truly and honestly gratified.

More than that, he saw a chance to advance his own interests in connection with those of his new friend.

"I have watched you, Dan," said he, "since you first struck this camp, and have liked your style, and have all along been sure that there was good stuff in you."

"It was kinder pitiful to see you bucking against hard quartz games, and getting knocked out every time, and more'n once I've felt like taking hold of you and putting you up to a thing or two; but I thought it would be best to wait until you had gone through the mill and got ground out."

"Now you are ready for business, and I mean to take you in on the ground floor of this card speculation, and am going to teach you all the tricks and turns of the trade. Then, if you take anything like such a fancy to me as I have taken to you, we will make a good working team as long as we pull together."

This proposition suited Dan Dillon to a notch, as he knew that Baby Bart was looked up to as an authority by all the sports of that region, and that only his unfortunate failing prevented him from being a rich man.

The compact was quickly and thoroughly carried out, to the great satisfaction of both the contracting parties.

Dan's executive ability was of immense advantage to Bart, while Bart's skill was a continual source of profit to Dan.

Thereafter Bart might spree it as he pleased, sure of finding a home and a friend and a cash balance when the fit was over; but the fact was that his periodicals became more infrequent and less severe, until it seemed to be possible that he might reform altogether.

Very soon after this partnership was formed Dan was the proprietor of a saloon with a department devoted to the worship of the Goddess of Chance.

There his prosperity was so rapid that in a little while he built and moved into the splendid establishment in which we find him at the beginning of this tale.

In the mean time he had been rising in every way in the estimation of the rapidly increasing population of Crosscut.

When the town sprung into prominence as a shipping point for cattle, the cowboys who came with the droves, finding themselves very thirsty and eager for excitement, attempted not only to drink all the whisky in Crosscut, but to run the town.

Their style of running a town meant nothing less than ruin to the established citizens.

The first attempt was a success, as it had not been expected, and no sort of preparation was made for it. They terrorized the Crosscutters, and pandemonium reigned during part of a day and an entire night. Saloons were gutted, stores were raided, citizens were shot down, and a general fusillade was kept up, until no person outside of their own crowd dared to show himself in the street.

Having captured Crosscut so easily, they marked it for their own; but the second attempt met a different reception.

Dan Dillon had organized and trained a body of resolute men, armed with Winchester rifles and revolvers, who were on guard when the droves arrived, but so unobtrusively that they were not suspected of any hostile intentions.

The first demonstration of rowdiness was promptly and severely checked.

Two of the strangers were arrested, and the attempt of their comrades to rescue them was met by such a merciless firing by foes that sprung up as if by magic, that the cowboys fled in wild disorder.

No pity was shown to them then, and no temporizing measures were resorted to.

The campaign was short, and decisive.

They were not permitted to bury their dead or succor their wounded, but were scattered, hunted from place to place, and threatened with being driven from the town and not allowed to set foot in it again.

Soon they submitted, in squads and one by one, and solemnly promised that forever thereafter they would keep the peace toward Crosscut and all its citizens.

It was they who bestowed upon Dan Dillon, the leader of the organization that had conquered them, the title of King of Crosscut, and it stuck to him, as well it might.

The rank which he had then well earned was

confirmed and made absolute on many subsequent occasions by the skill and courage which he exhibited in the suppression of all kinds of lawlessness.

Again and again he took the lead in the pursuit and punishment of cattle-thieves, horse-thieves, and organized marauders of all sorts and conditions.

He was invariably successful, and the prestige he thus gained added largely to his reputation, and increased his influence.

Wealth rolled in upon him, even when he scarcely made an effort to secure it, and in a short time he had become one of the solidest of solid citizens.

It was he who started the bank, in which he was a director.

It was he who suggested and assisted the enterprise of establishing a newspaper.

It was he who imported the preacher, and headed liberally the subscription by which the church was built.

In fine, he was Dan Dillon, the King of Crosscut, rich, powerful, and respected, but alone in the world, except for the friendship of Bart Scammell, the only person in the world for whom he cared.

The latter part of his story was, of course, well known to Baby Bart, to whom he told it only up to the time of his separation from Effie Harris in St. Louis, and his subsequent stumbling upon Crosscut.

"So that is the girl who is accused of murdering old man Seaver?" observed Bart. "Shouldn't wonder if she did it, for all she looks so soft and sweet, as if she hadn't the heart to kill a fly. What do you think about it, Dan?"

"I only think that she is a woman, and must have a fair show."

"Good enough. I reckon she'll get it, since the boys have had a look at her. And she knew that you were here in Crosscut?"

"Yes. It seems that she kept track of me. I got a letter from her, shortly after she married the old man, asking me to meet her at the town she stopped at when she came on with him that far."

"How did you answer it?"

"Not with a word. I burned the letter, and that was an end of it."

"You must have hated her savagely, Dan."

"I did not hate her at all. But I would rather hate a woman I had cared for, than be disgusted with her."

"There's a good bit in that. She wouldn't come to Crosscut, then, because she knew that you were here?"

"I suppose so."

"Maybe it was because she expected you to meet her where she was stopping."

"Perhaps."

"Well, Dan, she has come here at last, in spite of herself, and it looked a little while as if she would have a rough deal in Crosscut. What would you have done, pard, if the boys hadn't backed down?"

"Bart, there is no use at all in talking of what a man would have done, and precious little in speaking of what he is going to do. It is what he does that counts."

There was a knock at the door, and a man was admitted.

He proved to be one of Ike Nevins's deputy-marshals.

"Mr. Dillon," said he, "that girl in the jail wants to see you, and Mr. Nevins told me to ask you to come there."

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE AT MILLER'S STATION.

GEORGE INNES, telegraph operator at Miller's Station, was seated alone in his dreary little room in the station-house.

He was a bright young fellow, but was dull enough there, as he had no chance to be anything but dull.

George was ticket agent as well as operator. He was baggage-man also, and express agent.

But, though his duties were so various, he had precious little to do, as few trains stopped at Miller's Station except on signal, and his hardest work was found in his endeavors to kill time.

There was not a more lonesome place on the road than Miller's Station—no other house in sight, and nothing visible in any direction but bare, level, monotonous stretches of plain which did not begin to deserve the name of prairie.

Nothing would have been visible on that night if there had been anything to see, for the darkness was so thick outside that it might almost have been cut with a knife, and George Innes's oil lamp made the interior seem cheerful by comparison.

As no train that stopped at Miller's was due that night, and as it was not likely that there would be any telegraphic work to attend to, he prepared to lock up and get into bed, where he might find a refuge from his own society in the company of dreams.

But he was destined to have unexpected visitors that night.

For once, *i. e.*, his visitors were unwelcome.

The door opened and four men walked in from the platform.

George's room served the various purposes of bedroom, kitchen, dining-room, telegraph office, ticket office and express office. It was also the waiting room for infrequent passengers.

Consequently there was nothing strange in the fact that the men walked in without knocking or waiting to be invited.

But there was something peculiar in the style and manner of the visitors, who were rough-looking men, all heavily armed, carrying rifles as well as revolvers, and presented a truly formidable appearance.

George Innes at once guessed their errand, and was confirmed in his opinion by a second glance at the first man who entered, who proved to be the leader of the party.

He was a man of unusual height and massive size, his face covered with a heavy black beard and shaded by an immense felt hat, and his array of weapons made him look like a walking arsenal.

Young Innes had never before seen him, but had heard so much of him that he at once recognized him as Blant Suffield, the leader of one of the worst gangs of station and train robbers that ever worried a railroad.

It was easy to divine the object of the visit.

There was nothing worth stealing in the ticket office or the express office at Miller's Station, and it was to be supposed that Suffield was as fully aware of that fact as the agent was.

The purpose of the raiders, then, must be the robbery of a train.

The Through Express, which might be presumed to carry considerable wealth, passed Miller's at night, and Blant Suffield had chosen that station as an available point for stopping the train and "going through" it.

But there was nothing in the manner of the party as they entered that would indicate their purpose.

They came in quietly enough, gave George a friendly greeting, and three of them stood around while Blant Suffield seated himself in a chair opposite the operator.

The campaign opened at once, and just as Innes had expected it would.

"At what time does the Through Express pass here, my friend?" inquired Suffield.

"About ten-twenty," answered Innes.

He would have gained nothing by lying about it, as the time-table hung in plain sight, where it could be easily consulted.

"I suppose she will stop on signal?" suggested Suffield.

"I doubt it. I have no right to signal her, and have never tried it. I don't believe I could get her to stop here."

"I reckon you will signal that train for us, my friend. We want to go up the road."

That was plain enough, and there could be no doubt that the purpose of the robbers was to compel the operator to stop the train.

George Innes was a cool young man, with plenty of nerve, thoroughly devoted to his duty when he could find any duty to do.

He did not think at the moment of any personal risk he might run, but only of the danger that awaited the coming train.

It occurred to him that he might, without his purpose being suspected, send out a telegraphic alarm and call for assistance.

He turned his chair toward the instrument, which was clicking faintly.

"What do you want to do with that ticker?" demanded Suffield.

"Somebody called me," answered Innes. "I think it was Cheyenne."

"You lie! I don't like to speak to you in that way; but you know, my young friend, that you lied."

George did know it, and it was not worth while to object to the big man's statement of the fact.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "I had better send a message down the line to ask if I can stop the Express here?"

"I reckon you had better not. We don't understand the talk of that thing, you see, as well as you do. Look here, young man."

George Innes looked at the speaker, and at the same time looked into the barrel of a cocked revolver that was leveled at his head.

He began to understand his personal peril and the determination of the robbers.

"I don't see the use of that," he mildly remarked.

"The use of it is, my son, to kinder quell you. There ain't any danger in it if you behave and keep quiet. The fact is that you're a leetle too lively, and we've got to fix you before we attend to any other business. Don't try to make a noise, now, or off goes the top of your head."

"Of course I won't," said George. "What would be the use? There's nobody but you within miles of me."

"All right, my son. Fix him, boys!"

In a few minutes the robbers had bound the operator most securely, his legs being tied twice, and his arms pinioned behind his back.

They were also about to tie him to his chair; but a scarcity of cord caused the abandonment of that purpose.

Surely there was no need of securing him any more closely, as he was helpless.

Then they gagged him, and that seemed to be a needless "crowding of the mourners."

CHAPTER VII.

A TELEGRAPHER'S FEAT.

HAVING "fixed" the operator to their satisfaction, the robbers proceeded to attend strictly to the business that had brought them there.

Blant Suffield studied the time-table, to make sure that he had not been lied to, and looked at the station clock, which he compared with the heavy gold watch he carried.

Another man found a red lantern, which he lighted, after seeing that it was properly filled and trimmed.

Then they went out on the platform, closing the door behind them; but they did not close the window that opened on the platform, through which Innes could hear what they said, and could catch occasional glimpses of them.

He was harrowed by anxiety for the fate of the coming train, which would be almost sure to stop if the red light should be swung.

It then lacked nearly forty minutes of train time.

Those forty minutes might be of immense value, if he could only use a few of them.

He was gagged, so that he could not give any sort of an alarm by using his voice; but there was something in the room that could talk to a great distance.

If he could but reach his instrument and use it!

Then he could send an alarm down the line which would at least reach the train at the nearest station it stopped at.

He felt sure that the train men, if not taken by surprise, would be able to fight off the raiders.

He might, possibly, he thought, reach the instrument; but how could he hope to use it?

His legs were so tightly tied that he could scarcely move his feet, and his hands were tied at the wrists, so that he could stir nothing but the fingers.

Another consideration was that of danger.

If the robbers should chance to look through the window and catch him at the instrument, or should even suspect him of attempting to work it, sudden death would be his portion.

It was so doubtful whether he would be able to accomplish anything, that the risk seemed to be an awful one for such an uncertainty.

But he took the risk.

They had left him seated in his chair, from which he arose with difficulty, barely escaping a fall.

If he had fallen, they would not have let him rise again.

He discovered that he could move his pinioned feet just enough to shuffle along very slowly.

Luckily he was at but a little distance from the instrument, and he inched his way over the floor until he reached it.

Then he carefully turned around, got his hands up on the table, and felt for the key.

He found it, and then, by an effort of which he would not have deemed himself capable, he got a finger on the key.

At that moment he was so nervous that further proceedings were almost impossible.

He was greatly excited by what he had accomplished, and he knew that he stood nearly in plain view of the window.

At any moment he might be discovered, and a pistol bullet would put an end to his scheme and his life, but he braced himself up, controlling his nerves as well as he could, and discovered, to his great joy, that he was able to work the key.

Instead of sending a general alarm, he called the station at which he expected to strike the train.

It seemed an age to him before the call was answered, though in reality but a few minutes elapsed.

The truth was that his touch upon the key was so faint—scarcely more emphatic than that of an infant—that it was a wonder that it was noticed.

As soon as the call was answered he spelled out these words, slowly, feebly, and with the most extreme difficulty.

"Robbers here waiting for Express!"

A responsive clicking told him that his message was received and understood.

His task was finished, and he was at liberty to look out for his own safety.

That was no easy matter, as his nervous system was then completely prostrated, and nothing but the joy of his triumph kept him up as he slowly shuffled over the floor toward his seat.

The robbers were liable at any instant to step in at the door or look in at the window, and that would have meant death to him.

But nothing of the kind occurred, and he safely reached his chair.

He had just enough resolution left to let himself down upon it quietly, when his nerves gave way, unable to bear the tension any longer, and he became unconscious.

Just then the door opened, and Blant Suffield came in.

Seeing the operator seated there, with his

head dropped upon his breast, the robber went to him, removed his gag, and shook him.

As this did not awaken the young man, Suffield rubbed his wrists, and dashed some water in his face, until he revived.

If that rough surgeon could have known what his patient had just been doing, he would have doctored him after quite a different fashion.

"Seems to me that I heard the ticker going just now," said Suffield. "What did that mean?"

"Don't know," answered Innes. "I think I must have been asleep."

The robber went out again, after looking about the room suspiciously, and joined his comrades on the platform.

Immediately the galloping of a horse was heard, which stopped at the station.

"That you, Jim?" shouted Suffield. "Where have you been this long while? You ought to have joined us an hour ago."

"I was kep' back by some queer news I heerd," answered the new-comer, as he came to the platform. "I allowed that you would want me to git the rights of it, as it is suthin' you will want to know."

"What is it, Jim?"

"That woman you spoke of, who is Effie Seaver now, has been carried to Crosscut to be juggled!"

Blant Suffield frowned heavily, and he evinced a decided interest in this information.

"What seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"I'm told that she killed her old man, down on the Texan trail. They say that they've got the deadwood on her in the way o' proof, and that she'll git a rough deal at Crosscut."

"Boys," said the chief of the robbers, "that means business for me. As soon as we get this job off our hands, we must go to Crosscut and take her out of that jail."

"What have you got to do with the woman, Blant?" asked one of the men.

"She is my wife—or was, before she ran away from me. If I get her out of that scrape, I reckon she will come back to me. Another thing, boys—if she killed old man Seaver, she must have lots of money now, and when I get hold of it I will make a fair divide."

All this was overheard by the bound operator inside, who made a mental note of it.

"Queer that the train don't come," said Suffield after a few minutes. "She ought to be here now."

George Innes looked up at the clock, and saw that the time for the Express to pass his station had gone by.

Blant Suffield had failed to replace his gag, thus leaving him more comfortable and able to consider matters coolly.

Why was the train behind time? he asked himself as the minutes lagged along.

His alarm must have reached the station to which it was sent before the train got there, and it was not possible that the information would put a stop to the trip.

It was more likely that the delay was caused by preparations to meet the raiders.

This thought gave him hope that the train would not fly past the station without stopping—a course that would leave him in an uncomfortable position, to say nothing of a suspicion on the part of the robbers that their presence had somehow been made known down the line.

These reflections occupied his mind when he was startled by the roar and whistle of the coming train.

The robbers saw the gleam of the headlight before Innes heard the noise, and Suffield had stepped forward and begun to swing the red lantern before the whistle sounded, while his comrades stood by, ready for action.

Each of them had his position marked out, and knew exactly the part he was to play in the game.

Nearer came the rush and the roar, and Innes knew by the sound that the train did not intend to stop at the station.

This sent his heart down, but he hoped for the best.

Past the station flew the train at lightning speed, in a cloud of dust, and the shrill whistle screaming.

George Innes heard the men outside cursing and fuming with rage as it went by.

Then his quick ear, accustomed to the movement of trains, told him that it had slowed up, and he was almost certain that it had stopped a little way beyond the station.

This belief was confirmed by the voices of the robbers.

"She has stopped, sure enough," said one of them. "What does that mean?"

"It means that the game is up," angrily answered Suffield. "Come on, boys!"

Then followed the galloping of horses, and Innes knew that the robbers had been frightened away.

In a few minutes the door of the station opened, and a dozen men armed with Winchester rifles crowded into the room.

They hastened to release the operator, congratulating and praising him, and above all things they wondered how he had managed to send that message.

George Innes himself wondered how he had

done it, but was glad that he had accomplished the feat.

A guard was left with him, and the train hurried on.

Then a portion of the conversation that he had heard on the platform came into his mind, and he sat down at the instrument and sent this message to the operator at Crosscut:

"Blant Suffield and his gang are going to Crosscut to take from the jail a woman named Effie Seaver. They tried to rob a train here to-night, but were scared off."

George Innes's feat was speedily known at head-quarters, and he was soon promoted to the management of the telegraph office at Crosscut, a more lucrative position than that of operator at Miller's Station, and far more pleasant.

CHAPTER VIII.

LIFE IN CROSSCUT JAIL.

THE position of Effie Seaver in the new Crosscut jail contrasted strangely and brilliantly with that which she had occupied in the minds of the Crosscutters just previous to her arrival in the town.

Then she had been almost universally execrated, and doomed to the severest punishment that could be allotted to her supposed crime, considering her sex.

But her entry had been a triumph, and she had hardly ridden the length of the street when she had become the object of the adoration of Crosscut.

When she was confined in the jail, although deprived of her liberty, she could not have been much better treated if she had taken rooms at a hotel.

Ike Nevins had fallen early in the action.

He had been captured by her when he arrested her, and had been prevented from letting her go only by the presence of his deputies and the thought of his constituents at Crosscut.

He gave her a room in the lodging portion of the jail, and hastened to fit it up with the best furniture he had there, promising that it should be made finer and more comfortable the next day.

Effie seemed to take pleasure and pride in the fitting up of the room, and she showered upon the marshal her smiles and her soft words.

Scarcely was she established in her room, having been in the jail not more than three hours, when a splendid dinner was brought in to her—that is to say, as splendid as Crosscut could furnish.

Effie again began to lavish her thanks upon the marshal, but he interrupted her.

"You've got it wrong this time, miss," said he. "That ain't my treat. It came from Mr. Binley, cashier of the bank. I meant to do suthin' o' the sort; but he got ahead o' me."

Ike Nevins's rueful countenance plainly told the story of his sorrow.

Effie was charmed by the courtesy of Mr. Binley, and received him, when he came and asked the honor of an interview, as cordially as she had welcomed the dinner he sent her.

She was, indeed, allowed to receive company as she pleased in her apartment, the only restriction upon her being that she must not leave the jail building.

Mr. Binley proved to be a plain but lively man, not as young as he had been, and evidently infatuated with Effie.

They had wine together, and the cashier went away with bees buzzing in his head.

Soon another visitor was announced.

"Beg yer pardon, miss," said Ike Nevins; "but there's a blatherskite of an editor here, who says he would like to have a talk with you. Reckon he wants to write you up."

"But I don't want to be written up," snappishly replied the young woman. "The less there is of that just now, the better I will be pleased. Send him away, Mr. Nevins. Tell him that I am too much fatigued to see him—that I have a headache—anything to get rid of him. But be as polite and gentle about it as you can; for it is well to keep on the right side of those people. And, dear Mr. Nevins, I want you to do me one favor."

Just as if he had done anything but do her favors since she entered the jail.

"A million, miss," gushingly replied the marshal. "All you've got to do is to shout it out."

"Not quite that, as I am not anxious that all Crosscut should hear it. I will quietly say that I wish you would send to Mr. Dan Dillon, and ask him to call on me here."

"Dan Dillon!" ejaculated Ike.

"Yes; don't you know him?"

"Should say I do. He's the King of Crosscut."

"I was not aware that he was such a mighty monarch. He is the man I want to see. Please send for him right away."

Ike Nevins sent her message to the King of Crosscut as soon as he had got rid of Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton; but it went against the grain with him to do so.

"I wish I knew," he muttered, "what she knows about Dan Dillon, and what she wants of him. The hull town will be runnin' arter her; but he is one that she sends for. Reckon Dan will knock the rest of us out easy."

Dan Dillon came so quickly that his promptness again aroused the displeasure of the city marshal.

"Of course he jumped at the chance," grumbled Ike. "Would a duck swim, I wonder?"

But Dan's demeanor as he went to Effie's apartment, and the manner of the meeting of those two, might have made something of a change in Ike's opinion.

Effie Seaver had evidently prepared for her visitor, and was looking her best.

Her baggage, which was brought with her from the place where she was captured, together with Josiah Seaver's big wagon and drove of sheep, had been placed in her room by the order of Ike Nevins, and she was arrayed in all her glory, having used all the arts of adornment with which she was acquainted.

If she had been a vision of loveliness when she entered Crosscut, she was vastly more attractive when Dan Dillon found her in the Crosscut jail.

It must be admitted, too, that she played her part admirably.

Though her face was suffused with smiles, there were unshed tears in her eyes, ready to be turned loose when the occasion required them to flow.

"Oh, Dan! dear Dan!" she exclaimed in melting tones, as she advanced with outstretched arms to meet him. "I knew you would come to me."

Perhaps her visitor's face turned a shade paler, but no other sign of emotion was visible there.

He gave her one hand lightly, and coolly helped himself to a chair.

"You would have seen me, Mrs. Seaver," he said, "without sending for me. I intended to come here and ask you what I can do for you."

"Mrs. Seaver?" she replied, with an air of surprise. "Is it Mrs. Seaver now? Dan, you used to call me Effie."

"Yes, I used to."

"Is it not to be Effie again? Did you get the letter I sent you, asking you to come to me?"

"Yes, I got it."

"You got that letter, and you did not come!"

Sadness darkened the fair face, and the tears that had been held in reserve began to flow freely.

But the demonstration had no effect upon Dan Dillon.

"How could I go to you?" he asked. "I was too busily employed in making money, and money, you know, is the one thing needful, whether a man wants to buy a horse or a wife."

"Dan, that is mere spite and bitterness. Why did you come to me now?"

"Because you were in trouble."

It was a simple statement, coldly made; but it told her more of the honest, earnest, and determined nature of the man than she had yet known.

"And for no other reason?" she murmured.

"That is reason enough for me."

"I am told, Dan Dillon, that you are known as the King of Crosscut."

"That is what some people call me."

"And you have become a wealthy and influential man."

"I have money and power, and I have come here, Mrs. Seaver, to offer you my services to clear you of the terrible charge that is made against you. I want to do all I can for you, whether you are guilty or innocent."

"Guilty or innocent?" she passionately exclaimed. "You believe, then, that I am guilty?"

"I have no reason to believe that."

"At least, you doubt my innocence."

"I neither believe nor doubt. I have nothing to do with any consideration of that kind. I am here to help you. Will you accept my services?"

"No!" she answered indignantly, rising from her chair, and fixing upon him a look that was meant to be coldly scornful. "No, Mr. Dillon! I want no help that is grudgingly offered—nothing from a man who hates or despises me. You may go, sir. I am sorry that I sent for you."

She did indeed present a fine appearance just then, with her tearful but flashing eyes, and her honest indignation flaming up in her face.

But her glances might as well have fallen on stone, and her words might as well have been dropped into the water.

"You may go, sir," she said again. "I have money, and have no doubt that I will find friends. I have no use for such friendship as yours."

Dan arose, bowed, and put on his hat.

"All the same," he said, "I will do all I can for you. It is my duty, as well as my wish, to help you in your time of trouble. Good-evening."

Suddenly her mood and manner changed.

Again she stretched out her hands, imploringly this time. Again her eyes filled with tears, and even Dan Dillon could not doubt that they were the genuine article.

"Dan!" she exclaimed. "Dear Dan! Forgive me! I did not mean what I said. Will you not come to see me again?"

"I will come when you send for me," he answered.

Then he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Effie Seaver sunk into a chair, and burst into a passion of tears that flowed without any forcing.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SUFFIELD RAID.

THE very next day Effie Seaver again sent for Dan Dillon, and again he visited her at the jail.

But before she could fairly begin to speak of what she wanted to tell him, the interview was interrupted by Ike Nevins, who had something important to say.

"Beg yer pardon, miss," said the marshal; "but here is big news for you, as well as for me. The telegraph man here got a message last night from the man at Miller's Station, which said that Blant Suffield and his gang are comin' here to take you out o' jail."

Nevins, who was looking directly at her, saw her turn pale and shudder as he told this news, while a hard, fearful, and anxious look crept into her face.

Dan Dillon, who turned and looked at her curiously just then, also observed the same expression.

It was natural that both the men should wonder why such an interest should be taken in her by so notorious a scoundrel as Blant Suffield.

"Hope I hain't skeered you, miss," remarked Nevins.

"I must admit that I was startled," she replied. "Such a strange piece of news, so unexpected and so incredible, as I must say, almost upset me."

"Tis kinder queer, miss, for a fact." "Who is the man you speak of, and why does he want to take me away from here?"

"Blant Suffield, miss, is one of the toughest cases this kentry can scare up. The railroads and express people know him to their sorrow, and so do the stages he has held up, and lots of folks whose cattle and horses and money-bags he has got away with. Why he wants to snake you out o' Crosscut is too much for me. If you can't guess that conundrum, I have to give it up."

"I never heard of the man before, and I cannot believe that he has such an intention. Perhaps, Mr. Nevins, the message was a hoax."

"Not a bit of it, miss. It was from one telegraph man to another, and that's solid business, you can bet your sweet life. Seems that Blant started in to rob a train at Miller's Station last night, but got skeered off. The question is, miss, whether you want him to play the game I spoke of."

"Indeed, I do not. I prefer to remain here, and have good reasons for my preference. In the first place, do you suppose that I would want to be carried away from anywhere by a desperado of whom I know nothing? In the second place, I am treated well here, and am satisfied to stay until I can legally go free. In the third place, I want to have a full and fair trial, so that I can prove myself clear of the shameful charge they bring against me."

"That bein' the case, all I'll have to do will be to head off Mr. Suffield and his party. Dan, I shall have to ask you to join in, as you are the boss hand at schemes of that kind."

"You may count on me," answered Dan, "if Mrs. Seaver is willing."

"Willing?" exclaimed the young woman. "I am more than willing!"

"Then Blant Suffield will run his head against a quartz rock, and may get it smashed."

"If he happens to get himself killed," Effie suggested in her sweetest tones, "please let me know."

Further communication with the operator at Miller's Station revealed nothing more than was already known concerning the proposed raid, and it was conjectured that Suffield and his gang would visit Crosscut that night.

Preparations for their reception were accordingly made by Dan Dillon.

The Crosscut jail was eligibly located for such an operation as was contemplated by Suffield.

It had been built at the extreme end of the main street, because land was comparatively cheap in that quarter, and in the expectation that the town would soon grow up to it.

Though the walls were stout enough, no special attention had been paid to strengthening the doors and windows, and in that respect the structure was weak.

It was usually inhabited by Ike Nevins and two of his deputy marshals, who were supposed to guard it; but the force was obviously too weak to defeat an organized effort to capture the jail.

Consequently Mr. Blant Suffield and his merry men would have succeeded in their scheme without much difficulty, if their intention had not been overheard by George Innes and promptly communicated to Crosscut.

As it was, they made a disastrous failure. They selected for their attack, after the Indian fashion, the darkest and stillest time of the night, an hour or so before day.

Though Crosscut was then wrapped in gloom and slumber, they found a decidedly wide-awake body of men waiting for them at the jail.

Just as they had ridden up and dismounted, they were saluted by a sharp hail.

Their answer being unsatisfactory, a few rifle-shots followed, in answer to which they charged the jail in a body.

Foes seemed to rise out of the ground, easily outnumbering them, and by their perfect organization and exact knowledge of the locality possessing a strong advantage over them.

After the first volley from the deadly Winchester of Dan Dillon's men they hastened to mount and seek safety in flight.

Eight marauders, including Blant Suffield, had come to Crosscut, and six of them got away, more or less damaged.

Two were left dead near the jail; but the leader was not one of those two.

Thus far two men—not counting her recent husband—had died on account of Effie Seaver, and she seemed to be grieved because a third had not perished.

CHAPTER X.

EFFIE'S ACQUITTAL.

THERE might have been a few—Dan Dillon among them—who looked upon Josiah Seaver's widow as being somewhat heartless, if not actually bloodthirsty.

If there were any such, they carefully concealed their opinions, not only from her, but from the public.

It is not well to oppose oneself too openly to the ideas of the majority, and Crosscut had, by a large majority, gone wild about Effie Seaver.

Her visitors were so numerous that the jail-end of the town seemed to have suddenly become the most popular quarter of Crosscut, and the first citizens were among those who attended her morning levees and evening receptions.

She was continually provided with all the dainties that Crosscut could afford, and literature and flowers—such as they were—were abundantly supplied to her.

When Ike Nevins fitted up her apartment in the jail, he was justified in considering himself as having a prior claim upon the attractive young widow, and the best chance to secure her affections.

But he soon discovered that her numerous callers had reduced him to the position of an usher, leaving him little opportunity to interview the enchantress on his own account.

Though she had the faculty of conciliating all, and of seeming to be equally interested in all, the most prominent and frequent among her visitors were Abijah Binley, the cashier of the bank, Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton, the editor of the *Crusader*, Dolph Enders, owner of the principal drygoods and general store, Barney McCaffrey, the proprietor of the saloon that attempted to rival Dan Dillon's, and Primus Paulson, the imported preacher of the new church.

The last-named gentleman, unlike those who "come to scoff and remain to pray," went to the jail to pray for and with the fair prisoner, and remained to be fascinated by her, just as the others had been.

In the mean time preparations were being made for the impending trial of the young woman before the United States judge and a jury of Crosscutters.

Dan Dillon, though he called at the jail only when he was sent for, and always seemed to wish to cut his interviews as short as possible, was the most assiduous of any in his efforts to make the way clear for Effie's acquittal.

It was he who sent to Cheyenne and brought on the best criminal lawyer of that city, to assist Mr. Benjamin Crapster, the Crosscut luminary, who had already offered his services to the prisoner, free of charge.

It was he who carefully examined the jury panel, after having been consulted in its formation, and struck off the names of men who might possibly be shaky on the question of acquittal.

It was he who was popularly credited with having caused the mysterious and total disappearance of Albert Edes, the boy who had acted as driver for Mr. and Mrs. Seaver on their fatal journey.

In short, he freely used his power and influence as King of Crosscut, as well as his money, to secure the acquittal of the woman who had thrown him over.

As for public opinion, what Dan did not do toward directing it in Effie's interest was done by her admirers who have been mentioned, and it was almost unanimously in her favor.

Thus her affairs went on swimmingly, and there was but one complication that threatened to make trouble for her.

It was caused by the arrival of Josiah Seaver's nephew, Arthur Seaver by name, who had read an account of the tragedy in an Eastern newspaper, and had hastened to Crosscut.

There he established himself, and began to use his best efforts in aid of the prosecution.

It was natural that he should wish to avenge the death of his uncle, and perhaps a little more natural that he should seek to get possession of his uncle's property.

The intelligent reader will not be surprised by the information that this young man became exceedingly unpopular in Crosscut.

Not only did he refuse to worship the idol of

the town, but he was accused of attempting to rob an unfortunate and interesting widow.

He was compelled to keep himself mostly out of public view, in order to avoid the indignant Crosscutters who were only too willing to pick a quarrel with him.

Possibly the young man—and he was by no means as young as he had been, either—was justified in speaking of the trial, which occurred soon after his arrival, as "a farce," and in imputing various obnoxious qualities to the Goddess of Justice as she showed up in Crosscut.

But he discreetly refrained from shouting any of those remarks into the public ear.

The building which was used for court purposes was crowded, and the principal occupation of the Crosscutters and surrounding residents was watching and discussing the Effie Seaver trial, varied and assisted by frequent visits to the bar-rooms.

It was evident from the start that the popular feeling was in favor of the prisoner, and the jury was practically made up by the defense, the prosecution soon exhausting its challenges on a panel that was manifestly one-sided.

The evidence, also, conspicuously failed to establish the accusation.

There was no proof of the *corpus delicti*—of the actual death, whether by murder or otherwise, of Josiah Seaver.

No substantial proof of anything, in fact, outside of the statements and admissions of the fair prisoner.

The boy driver, Bert Edes, who was reported as having witnessed the commission of the crime, and upon whom the prosecution mainly relied, but mysteriously and totally disappeared, as has been stated, and all efforts to find and produce him had been unavailing.

The lawyers for the prosecution, one of whom had been employed by Arthur Seaver, made the most they could of what they termed the spiriting away of young Edes; but the fact remained that the evidence they needed was lacking.

As for the two herders, they had both been with the sheep a mile or so ahead of the wagon when Josiah Seaver perished, and they knew nothing of his death but what was told them by Mrs. Seaver when she rode down to them and gave the alarm.

One of them was a Mexican, speaking little English, ignorant, stupid, and quite unavailable as a witness.

The other was a passably intelligent American, who said that Mrs. Seaver had promised to pay them both liberally, after the occurrence, if they would stick to her and take the outfit down into Texas.

But this evidence was not regarded as counting anything against her.

The northward-bound movers, who had struck the train shortly after the death of the old man, gave the only evidence that was of value; but it had to be squeezed out of them.

When they reached Crosscut their story had borne very strongly against the young woman; but their unpopularity in the town had since become so oppressive that they modified and toned it down on the trial to the best of their ability.

The purport of their testimony was that their suspicions were at once aroused, and when they questioned Mrs. Seaver closely she made contradictory statements; first saying that Mr. Seaver committed suicide, and then declaring that he had met his death by an accident.

Their suspicions were so strong that when they reached Crosscut they reported the affair a murder, and caused a pursuit of the alleged criminal to be made.

On cross-examination they admitted that their suspicions originally arose from the fact that Mrs. Seaver was the young wife of an old man.

They made the further admissions that their questioning had been pretty rough, and that the lady was so agitated at the time that she seemed hardly to know what she was saying.

For the defense the fair prisoner was called as a witness.

She had been wearing a veil during the trial, and had permitted the spectators to get only casual and scant glimpses of her face—just enough, indeed, to excite their curiosity and increase their interest in her.

When she stepped to the stand with a regal air, arrayed in the most attractive of her adornments, a buzz of admiration filled the room.

As she seated herself, she removed her veil, and her beauty burst upon the crowd as it previously had in the main street of Crosscut.

Instantly there arose a roar of applause, which could not be checked until she put an end to it by a smile and a wave of her white hand.

She gave a description of the journey toward Texas, up to the time of Mr. Seaver's death, and that description revealed no sort of discord or unpleasantness.

When she brought it down to the time of the fatal event, she was listened to with the deepest attention, and scarcely a sound but her voice was heard in the crowded room.

There were two saddle-horses, she said, that were led behind the wagon in which she and her

husband traveled, and Bert Edes, the boy who drove their ox team, was occasionally mounted on one of the horses, and sent forward to communicate with the herders, who were usually ahead of the rest of the outfit.

The team had been halted near a canyon, as Mr. Seaver styled it, and young Edes had been sent by him on one of the horses to carry a message to the herders.

Then he proposed to her that they should go and take a look at the canyon, and they walked over there together.

The canyon, which was at a little distance to the right of the trail, proved to be a singular cleft in the rock that underlay the plain, perhaps not over ten yards wide, but, as it seemed, unfathomably deep.

Mr. Seaver explained to her that it had been cut through the rock, in the course of ages, by a small stream, which was then flowing far below them, at the bottom of the cleft.

It made her shudder to look over the edge, and she turned away; but her husband, to show her how good his nerve was, remained standing at the verge.

Suddenly he uttered a faint cry, threw up his hands, and staggered like a drunken man. She ran to his assistance, but he fell before she could reach him, and disappeared in the dark and fathomless abyss.

As soon as possible she mounted the remaining horse, galloped forward to the herders, and told them of the tragedy.

As there was no way of recovering the body, and as there seemed to be nothing to do but to continue the journey, she had of course promised to pay the men for their services in taking the outfit on to Texas.

Such was her testimony, which no amount of cross-examination could shake.

When she left the stand, her comprehensive glance, full of innocence as well as of supplication, took in the crowd, and rested on the jury, producing an effect that was both audible and visible.

The only other witness for the defense was Ike Nevins, who testified to having gone down the trail with his deputies and arrested the prisoner.

He had brought the entire outfit up to Crosscut, and the lady was not only willing to accompany him, but was even anxious, when she learned the charge that had been made against her, to go where she could face it.

The lawyers summed up, two speeches on each side, and it was manifest to the audience that those who spoke for the prosecution were rowing against wind and tide.

Then the judge summed up, briefly and in a non-committal manner, and the case went to the jury.

With the jury it was evidently a mere matter of form.

They solemnly filed out, and in a few minutes they joyfully filed in.

Their verdict, rendered by the foreman with a smile that was intended for the entire crowd, was "Not guilty."

CHAPTER XI.

"A WOMAN SCORNEO."

Not guilty!

It was the verdict which everybody had expected, and which nearly everybody had desired.

The Crosscutters who crowded the room and the building, and who raised such a yell when it was rendered as seemed about to take the roof off, not only had expected it, but would not have allowed anything else.

The lawyers on both sides, who had easily felt the pulse of the people, had expected it as a matter of course.

Bart Scammel, who had sat the trial through, with his eyes fixed on the accused, had expected it, and shouted his approval at the top of his voice.

Dan Dillon, who had done more than any other one person—with the exception, perhaps, of the prisoner herself—to bring about the result, was doubtless satisfied with his work, but gave no indications of his feelings.

He had scarcely been visible in the court-room, and his observations when he was there were mainly confined to Bart Scammel, whose intense interest in the proceedings and the prisoner seemed to amuse him.

Effie Seaver had also expected a verdict of not guilty, having had ample assurance previous to the trial that the issue would not be against her.

She was deeply agitated, but at the same time smilingly triumphant.

How could she be otherwise, as she listened to the wild chorus of cheers and yells that greeted the result?

Her eager gaze searched the room for Dan Dillon, and her flushed face turned pale as she failed to discover him there.

She had a splendid triumph; but there was one thing lacking.

When she left the court-room, her reception by the crowd outside was an ovation.

The finest conveyance the town could afford had been brought to the door, and she was drawn in it by a crowd of excited Crosscutters to the

Longhorn Hotel, where the best room in the house had been engaged for her.

At the hotel they continued to press their attentions upon her and she was compelled to hold a reception.

She got through with it, however, as soon as possible, and excused herself for retiring from the public view by the plea of a severe headache.

Then she sent for Dan Dillon.

The King of Crosscut came to her promptly as he had come when she was in the jail; but there was no change from his usual demeanor visible, and he had no congratulations to offer her upon her triumphant acquittal.

For her part, she received him with radiant face, eager eyes, outstretched hands, and a voice that was full of the warmest welcome.

But he was utterly unresponsive to these demonstrations.

"What is your pleasure, Mrs. Seaver?" he coldly asked, as he helped himself to a chair.

"My pleasure?" she replied, in a grieving tone.

"I am afraid that my pleasure is to prove my pain. Why do you speak so strangely?"

"You sent for me, Mrs. Seaver, and I am here. I now ask you what I can do for you."

"You have already done so much for me, Dan, that I wanted to thank you. I hoped, too, that it would be a pleasure to you to congratulate me on the result of the trial."

"You were surely very lucky," was his frigid reply.

"Very lucky? Do you mean to insinuate, then, that I was guilty of that crime?"

"I don't mean to insinuate anything. But you must be aware of the fact that I talked with that boy, Bert Edes, before he—that is to say, when he was here."

Her face fell at once, and she cast upon her visitor a look in which fear was mingled with anger.

But she was smiling brightly when she raised her eyes, and again she spoke pleasantly.

"You have been so kind and faithful to me, Dan, that I can never do enough to pay you for your goodness. I know that it was your help, more than anything else, that saved me from serious trouble."

"I did what I could for you when you were in trouble," he answered. "But your trouble is over now, and you have no further need of me."

Tears came into her eyes, and she reached out her hands imploringly.

"No need of you?" she exclaimed. "I do need you, Dan. I need you now more than ever. You are the one thing in the world that I need. Dear Dan, I have always needed you since I met you."

"But you needed money more than you needed me," he suggested with a sneer.

"How can you taunt me with that? It was for you that I needed it, as much as for myself. It was for your sake that I suffered myself to be tied to that old man. That was what I wanted to tell you in St. Louis, when you would not wait to hear me."

"I was afraid that you wanted to say something of the kind, and for that reason I got away from you."

"But it is all right now, Dan," she eagerly continued. "He is dead, and I have plenty of money, and you have plenty, and why should we not be happy?"

"I have no wish that you should be otherwise than happy, Mrs. Seaver."

"But I cannot be happy without you. Oh, Dan! dear Dan! why are you cold and distant toward me? Is it never to be Effie again?"

"Never."

"Never to be again as it used to be? It was Effie then."

"I cared for you then. Now I care nothing at all for you."

"You care nothing for me, Dan?"

"I have no use in the world for you, Mrs. Seaver. You are so heartless and mercenary that I take no interest in you. A woman whom I once loved, but since learned to despise most thoroughly, is less than nothing to me now. Go on and enjoy, if you can, the money you gained by that old man's marriage and death. My only wish is that I may never again see you or hear of you."

The poet spoke for all times and places when he said that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

Effie Seaver at that moment seemed to be transformed, the wrath of a demon showing in her eyes, her voice, her acts and words.

Even Dan Dillon shrunk from her as she arose and turned upon him, with flashing eyes and upraised hand.

"Have you said your say?" she roughly demanded. "Have you said all you wanted to say? I understand you now, Dan Dillon, most thoroughly, and you shall understand me, too. So you despise me do you? Well, I will match your scorn with my hate, and we shall see which will win. And you wish that you may never see me or hear of me again. You may wish and wish, Dan Dillon, but that wish will never come true. You shall have me with you always, to your sorrow, and I shall pursue you to your utter ruin!"

"Very grand," observed Dan, as the fair virago paused for breath. "Instead of wasting your sweetness on light opera, you should have been a queen of tragedy."

"You may sneer, sir," she resumed; "but the sneer will work around to the back of your head before I am through with you. I will make you suffer for your scorn. Oh, you don't know what I can do when I am roused."

"And like a rat without a tail," quoted Dan, "I'll do, I'll do, I'll do."

"Yes, I'll do, and my doings will make you wish that your tongue had been cut out before you dared to speak to me as you have spoken this day. They call you King of Crosscut, and you are said to be a rich and influential man here; but your crown shall be torn from your head, and your money and power shall melt away, and then you will know that it was I who stripped you and threw you out."

"Very grand!" remarked Dan again. "Now Mrs. Seaver, just one word before I go: Suppose you should succeed in doing what you say you mean to do. I don't believe you can do it; but, suppose it done. There would still remain one thing for you to do."

"What is that, sir?"

"To find some way of hurting me."

"Oh, I shall hurt you, and I have no doubt that I will find the way. I only hope that you may live until I can work my will upon you."

"Better hurry up, then. Life is uncertain at the best, and particularly so in Crosscut and in my line of business. Good-day."

Dan Dillon went his way, and dismissed from his thoughts the woman who had threatened him.

Effie Seaver remained shut up in her room, and her thoughts were full of the man who had left her.

CHAPTER XII.

AN EDITOR ASTONISHED.

If Dan Dillon had the faintest idea that the woman he had scorned would dismiss him from her memory, he had yet to become acquainted with her.

She opened her campaign at once, in a manner and by means which he would not have been likely to guess at. Her sure intention was that he should know nothing of her work until he felt its effects.

If the King of Crosscut was to be dethroned it might be supposed that a queen would prove competent to the task, and she intended to create herself the Queen of Crosscut.

In this ambition, whether it was an honorable one or not, she had abundant advantages.

Money is a useful ally in all manner of schemes, and she had plenty of money, or of property that could be turned into money.

It was true that Arthur Seaver, though he had failed in his endeavors to procure her conviction of murder, had remained in Crosscut for the purpose of prosecuting his claims to his uncle's estate, but Effie was already several points ahead of him in that game. She had possession, Ike Nevins having turned over to her the property that he had brought from below, and her lawyer having hastily signed for her everything he could lay legal hands on.

She had a deed, executed by Josiah Seaver before his marriage, of a large quantity of land, valuable jewels which he had given her, and a round sum of money.

Her marriage to the old man was incontestable, and her triumphant acquittal had given her a splendid send-off.

Consequently she was justified in believing that though Arthur Seaver might bother her to some extent, he could do her no lasting injury.

As he was poor and unpopular, the chances were all in her favor.

As for Effie's popularity, there had never before been anything like it known in that section, and doubtless would never be again. If the people had run after her when she was in the jail, they fairly galloped when she had removed to the Longhorn Hotel. If they had previously petted and praised her, they then feasted her, and overwhelmed her with adoration.

Immediately, and with scarcely an effort on her part, she was enthroned as the Queen of Crosscut.

In her capacity of Queen she easily and largely outshone the present King of Crosscut; but that fact made not a bit of difference to Dan Dillon, who had ceased to interest himself in her.

In the hotel, as in the jail, she proved that she possessed the faculty of conciliating all and ingratiating herself with all.

Though her callers—most of whom might be counted as her admirers—amounted to a crowd, they never came in collision with each other, and did not seem to get in each other's way.

As she was free then, with a vast spread of country about her, and plenty of opportunities for walking and riding, she was able to give greater variety to the entertainment of her guests, making their interviews general or exclusive, as she chose.

Thus she began, gradually and cautiously, but quite rapidly, to enlist her subjects in the campaign which she had planned against Dan Dillon.

One of the most loyal of her subjects, as well as one of the most fervent of her worshippers, was Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton, the editor of the *Crosscut Crusher*.

He was a young man, not at all handsome, and not peculiarly gifted, except in the way of vanity.

His ideas of his personal importance and of his position as an advance spreader of intelligence and mold of public opinion were largely developed, and Effie encouraged them, expecting to use, as she had already used, the *Crusher* for the advancement of her own plans and interests.

Though she did not really favor him any more than she favored the others, she easily led him to believe that she took a special interest in him.

As may be supposed, he was greatly puffed up by that belief, and he got into the way of boasting—in his sober moments, as well as in those which were not so sober—of his intimacy with the Queen of Crosscut.

There were those in Crosscut, among whom might be counted the Queen aforesaid, who were of the opinion that Tipton's editorial altitude ought to be lowered a peg or two, and they prepared a plan for that purpose.

It was not proposed to damage him at all in person or property, but to give him what might be termed an impressive surprise.

The first step in the programme was the easy one of inducing Tipton, on the evening of the day which had witnessed the weekly issue of his paper, to celebrate himself in a jovial manner.

He was escorted about among the bar-rooms by a select company of boon companions, who treated him lavishly, and would never allow him to pay a cent of the score.

They mixed his drinks, too, in a manner which played such havoc with Tipton's head, that he fell early in the action.

It was, indeed, hardly midnight when he was carried into a private room in Barney McCaffrey's establishment, and was dumped upon a bed, so that slumber might sweetly restore his tired nature.

While he was held tightly in the clutch of Morpheus, a transformation scene was taking place in Crosscut.

A number of mechanics and others, among whom were the friends who had tempted the editor to his fall, were busily at work during the night at two houses, one of which was the office of the *Crusher*.

It was not until after daylight that they finished their labors and retired from the scene.

The sun was several hours high when the editor was sufficiently awake to arouse himself and get up.

He sought the bar-room, which was unoccupied then except by a strange barkeeper, and called for a "snifter," which was given him.

"Hang it up," remarked Tipton.

"Hang nothin' up. I'll hang you up, stranger, if you try to play any sech games here."

"Don't you know me? I am Mr. Tipton, the editor of the *Crosscut Crusher*."

"It won't work, stranger. I'll give you that drink, as you seem to be needin' of one; but don't you tell me no more lies."

"But I am the editor of the *Crusher*, and I have an account here."

"Don't know nothin' about no *Crusher*. The editor of the *Advance* has got an account here, and that's as much as we can stand. Come to think of it, there was another snipe of an editor about here a year or so ago; but they say that his head was turned by a young woman, and he skipped the town at night, and was never heard of ag'in. Folks allow that he committed suicide, though some do think that his head got so big that it bust."

Tipton had heard enough, and he sneaked out into the street.

There was something wrong—no doubt of that; but what was it that had happened to him?

The last thing he remembered was an indefinite series of mixed drinks; but he had not the faintest idea what had become of him after that bout with the usual enemy.

He knew that his eyes were not yet fairly open, and that his head was in a fearfully muddled condition.

But he would go to his office, give himself a good wash, and then be able to take account of stock and see where he stood.

He took a somewhat circuitous route, as he did not care to expose himself to the public view just then.

Though he saw a few people whom he thought he knew, nobody recognized him, and this fact added to his perplexity.

What had happened to him?

The town looked about as usual—no change in its appearance that he could discover as he rubbed his eyes and stared about.

But he perceived an astonishing change when he looked at himself.

In place of the neat and somewhat gaudy suit for which he had swamped an advertising bill in the hope of captivating Effie Seaver, he was attired in miner's garments much the worse for wear, and from hat to boots the outfit was strange to him.

He began to believe that he must have just awakened from a Rip Van Winkle sleep.

But he would go to his office, and the boys there would put him on the trail of himself.

He reached the office, or the place where the office had been; but it was no longer there.

The shanty that had held the printing office was there, but was occupied as a liquor shop of the cheap variety; which bore the appearance of having been established a long time.

Tipton walked in, and stared about in amazement, seeing not even a splotch of ink on the rude walls.

"Vot you wants?" roughly demanded the Teutonic proprietor.

"I am Mr. Tipton, the editor of the *Crusher*, and I want to know what has become of my office."

"Shakey! Go quick, Shakey, unt call a policeman. Dis man says he's a squasher."

"I say that I am Mr. Tipton, the editor of a newspaper that was published here."

"A noosebaber? Ah, yah. Unt you vas der edidor? By shimminy, dot vas too funny. Anyt'ings more?"

"I want to know what has become of the *Crusher* office."

"Shakey, you knows anything about dot squasher, hey?"

"Dere once vas a sort of an edidor by here," answered the younger Teuton. "He vent grazy about a young woman, unt run away unt cut his t'roat off. But nopody gared for dot."

"Der *Advance* noosebaber," observed the proprietor, "vas down der street a leedle vay. You besser vas go by dot, mister."

It was just what McCaffrey's barkeeper had told him. Another newspaper had taken the place of the *Crusher*, and what had become of him, Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton, during the unknown interval that had elapsed since that last round of mixed drinks?

Surely he could not fail to strike somebody in Crosscut who used to know him.

Sadly and slowly he straggled down the street in search of the newspaper office.

He found it, and entered it timidly, as he had by this time been driven to the belief that he was no longer what he once was.

But his amazement was only equalled by his joy when he discovered that it was his own office—in a much nicer and more suitable building, but his own office.

His cases were there, and his press was there, and a few printers who had worked for him were setting type, and Jim Miles, who had been his foreman, was pawing over the the exchanges and vigorously plying the scissors.

But, as he stepped forward to greet them, they looked at him curiously, as if he were an utter stranger.

"Don't you know me, Jim?" he exclaimed in anguish. "For mercy's sake say that you do know me!"

Jim Miles looked at him carefully a few minutes, and then extended his hand.

"Boys!" he exclaimed, "it is Mr. Tipton, come back at last! Where have you been for a year and more, old man? You look as if hard times had struck you."

"Where have I been?" answered the editor. "That is what I would like to know. Can't you tell me something about it?"

"You disappeared one night, and they told us that you had gone crazy about a young widow who was stopping at the Longhorn. It was supposed that you had committed suicide. The office was sold to pay your debts, and—"

"Hold on, Jim! This is too much! I can't stand it. Has my life been a blank all that time? Give me a pistol, and let me blow my brains out."

"Better keep what you've got left. I will take you out and give you something to warm you, and then we will talk the matter over."

Miles took his employer to McCaffrey's, where Tipton found collected the same party with whom he had such a jovial time the night before, and they greeted him uproariously.

"Hello, Tip! When did you crawl out? How much does your head weigh this morning? What did you do with the fine clothes you were sporting last night?"

The editor, doubly amazed, demanded an explanation.

He was told that his friends, desirous of seeing the *Crusher* establishment in better quarters, had taken that method of removing it for the purpose of giving him a pleasant surprise.

He admitted that he was surprised.

CHAPTER XIII.

DAN'S STOCK DECLINES.

HANNIBAL ARTAXERXES TIPTON, though vastly pleased with the new quarters that had been given him for the *Crusher*, was not exactly the same man that he had been.

It was a great satisfaction to him to know that he had not suffered an eclipse of a year and more, but his brief experience had been a severe one.

He had learned some points concerning himself of which he had not previously been aware, and his estimate of his own importance had been considerably modified.

When he regained his new suit he did not

hasten to don it and visit Effie Seaver, as the story of the trick that had been played him was common property, and of course she knew all about it.

But her relations with the editor were still friendly, and she was able to use him to suit her purposes.

About these times Dan Dillon began to observe a decided decrease in the popularity which he had hitherto enjoyed in Crosscut.

He could not help noticing it as it was both general and marked.

The custom of his saloon was gradually falling off, the receipts showing a daily reduction, and the games which he offered for the allurements of the public were nearly neglected, except by strangers.

Barney McCaffrey's place had been known as the "Enterprise," but he had changed its name to the "Effie," and was having a great rush of business.

The tide of patronage was setting strongly in his direction, and promised to leave the Dillon establishment high and dry.

Another point which Dan could not help noticing was the changed manner of many of his former friends and acquaintances.

Men whom he had befriended, men who had believed in him, men who had praised and looked up to him, men with whom he had been intimately connected in business matters and socially, seemed to be inclined to give him the cold shoulder, not openly and at once, but slyly and by degrees.

He was less frequently consulted on questions that concerned the welfare of Crosscut and the surrounding country, and was entirely left out of an important public meeting at which he had expected to be called upon to preside.

In short, his popularity was rapidly waning.

He could easily guess the origin of the changed feeling of the Crosscutters, and did not need the insinuations which he occasionally heard to impute it to the intrigues of the woman he had scorned, who was then queening it at the Longhorn Hotel.

As she had risen in public favor, Dan Dillon had fallen, and the men who were the most inclined to treat him coldly were those who were the most intimate with Effie Seaver.

The impression prevailed that he was hostile to the Queen whom the Crosscutters had almost unanimously agreed to idolize.

Ike Nevins, whom Dan had made as a public man, never sought his friend and benefactor any more, but actually avoided him.

This, too, though the marshal seldom had a chance to interview his recent prisoner after she had removed to the hotel.

Editor Tipton, who owed his position to Dan's money and influence, printed some dirty flings that were understood to refer to the King of Crosscut.

The imported preacher—Dan's importation—made a savage remark in one of his sermons, which was at once recognized as an allusion to Dan Dillon.

Dan gave himself little uneasiness, if any, concerning the growing disfavor with which he was regarded.

He knew that the public of Crosscut, like the public everywhere, were fickle-minded, and had no doubt that in due time a returning wave would bring them back to him.

But there was one thing that grieved him greatly, and that was the defection of his tried friend and partner, Bart Scammell.

Baby Bart, like Ike Nevins and the rest, had become a changed man since Effie Seaver's arrival in Crosscut, and no person could have truly declared that the change was for the better.

His demoralization did not fairly develop itself until after he had sat and stared at Effie Seaver during her trial.

Then it grew and blossomed and went to seed with surprising celerity.

He became one of the most ardent admirers and most constant visitors, greatly to the neglect of the joint business of himself and his partner.

He suddenly bloomed out in store clothes, boiled shirts and flaming neckties, and was more than suspected of having taken to perfumery.

While this was going on he exhibited such an indifference to Dan Dillon and his affairs, that the relations between the two, as the newspapers sometimes say of European countries, became "strained."

Dan had reason to believe that the loss in popularity of the gaming portion of his establishment was mainly due to the defection of his colleague; but he said nothing to Bart about it, leaving him, with the rest of mankind, to find his level, and come to his balance in the course of time.

But he did make an effort, for the sake of his old friend, to draw him off from the foolish and profitless trail which he had set out to follow.

With this view he cornered Bart one day, and "tackled" him.

"I understand, old pard," said he, "that you, like some of the others, have gone crazy about the pretty young widow at the hotel."

Bart climbed up on his dignity at once.

"It is my opinion, Mr. Dillon, that I have

sense enough to know what I am about. If you think that I am a crazy man, perhaps you had better keep away from me."

"Don't get huffy, Bart. We have been firm friends, and should not let any small matter part us. It is as a friend that I speak to you and want to advise you. What sort of a chance do you think you stand, with the crowd that is tagging after her?"

"I don't know anything about any crowd, Mr. Dillon; but I do know where I stand, myself. She told me yesterday that I was the finest figure of a man she had ever seen."

Obviously there was no use in talking to a man who was that far gone; but Dan repressed an inclination to laugh.

"And I suppose you went right off," said he, "and bought a new necktie. That was a highly flattering remark, Bart, and I don't doubt that you fully deserved the compliment. But I am afraid, old pard, that she says the same, or as much as that, to the rest of them."

Baby Bart flared up then.

"Now, Dan Dillon, I want you to understand that even you have no right to talk to me in that style, or to speak of her in that way. She is a lady, and it won't do for you to run her down because she jilted you, and it's as like as not that she had good reasons for pitching you over. One side of a story is good enough, you know, until the other is heard."

"Then she has been telling you her side of the story, has she?"

"No. She is too much of a lady to say anything against anybody. But I can judge, from little things that crop out here and there, what it would be if she should tell it."

"Just so, and it would put me in a bad light."

"Well, I'm afraid that it wouldn't show you up as a full-blooded angel. Of course you are jealous, since you see that so many want her, and of course you hate her; but you won't gain anything by hunting her down and making light of her."

Dan put his hand on the shoulder of his former friend.

"Look here, Bart," said he; "I don't believe that you ever caught me in a lie or in any sort of meanness, and now I am going to tell you the square truth. I am not the least bit jealous of you or of anybody else in regard to that woman. I do not hate her, and have never tried to hunt her down or to make light of her. On the contrary, I have done what I could to help her when she was in trouble. At present I have no feeling for or against her at all, except that I am glad that she pitched me over, as you call it."

"Why is it, then, that you have treated her so cruelly and unkindly?"

"Did she tell you that I had treated her cruelly or unkindly?"

"No; but I have heard it."

"From whom did you hear it?"

"Can't exactly say. It seems to be in the air, like."

"Let it stay in the air then. If it should come down it might get hurt. We must keep friends, Bart."

"All right, if you quit tackling me about her, —and you will quit it, unless you want a fuss."

"I will quit it then, old pard."

After this disagreement, and considering the state of excitement under which he was laboring, it was no wonder that Baby Bart slid off on one of his periodical sprees.

Dan Dillon really welcomed this misfortune for once, as for a time he believed that whisky would entirely shut out from his friend's mind all thoughts of Effie Seaver.

When Bart was fairly established in this course, he called on his partner for money to enable him to carry the spree through.

"You won't see me here for a while, I reckon," he remarked, as he pocketed the funds that were given him.

"All right, Bart. You will find a home and a friend here when you get ready to come back."

CHAPTER XIV.

DAN IS HIT HARD.

THE next important incident in the career of the King of Crosscut was connected with the arrival of a high-toned sport from the East.

His name was Eugene Thistlewood, and he was so exceedingly high-toned in his dress and his manners, that few would have suspected him of being a gambler by profession.

In fact he was not so suspected in Crosscut, where he announced himself as a speculator in search of profitable investments in mining and other property.

In a very short time, owing to his alleged wealth and his visible liberality, he became a popular character in Crosscut.

Eugene Thistlewood was of course introduced to Effie Seaver, the reigning Queen of Crosscut, and he paid his respects to her with the rest of her subjects.

But he was also granted private interviews, outside of the knowledge of the others, and the nature of these interviews implied previous acquaintance and an arranged plan.

If Dan Dillon could have been present, but unseen, at the first of them, he would have been

at no loss to account for an event that there-after befell him.

"You got my letter, then, Eugene?" inquired the young woman.

"I got your letter. I was traveling, and it was forwarded to me. That caused a delay, but I started as soon as I read it, and here I am, at your service."

"I had almost given you up, and was wondering what had become of you."

"I had intended to come before I heard from you. I saw by the papers that you had got into a scrape here."

"Yes; but I got out of it."

"It was a pretty serious scrape, judging by the accounts I read, and I would advise you to keep clear of that kind of business. It is dangerous."

"One experience is enough for me," she answered; "I am satisfied. As it happens, Eugene, you have come here just at the right time for the success of the speculation I proposed to you. The way is clear now, and you can't fail."

"Glad to hear that. Please explain the business a little more definitely."

"This man Dillon, Eugene—the man who owns the place I spoke of—is not a greenhorn by any means; but he has little to do with the games that are run there. He is sharp enough, I am told, at poker and that sort of thing, but not good for much outside of his specialties."

"And I am not to tackle him on his specialties, as I understand it."

"Not if you want to make an easy stake and a big one. The faro game is run usually by his partner, Bart Scammell, a man who comes to see me occasionally, and who naturally tells me a thing or two, and he is, if I remember the description rightly, a whole team and a dog under the wagon."

"I have met him—a big, burly, good-natured fellow, but pretty well puffed up."

"That's the faro fiend. Well, Eugene, this sweet little baby of a Bart has a way of undertaking big campaigns against the whisky bottles of the towns, in which he of course comes out worsted after a week or so. He is on one of his hullaballos now, and that man Dillon attends to the games in his absence, though I understand that there are not many flies walking into that parlor just now. So you see, Eugene, as I told you, that the way is clear, and you may go in and win."

"Thank you for the information. And now, miss—I really don't know exactly what name I ought to give you just now."

"Miss Seaver."

"I thought it might be Mrs."

"Never mind that."

"And now, Miss Seaver, if I understand you correctly, you won't claim any commission, or any share in the profits of the speculation you have offered me."

"Not a dollar."

"It was not always thus. How you must hate him!"

"I do hate him."

"Or love him?"

"I hate him, I tell you."

"But you must have loved him once, or you would not hate him so intensely now. But we will let that pass. I am here for business, and you may be sure that I will attend to it strictly. I suppose, Miss Seaver, that you prefer that I clean him out."

"Completely—every dollar that you can draw from him."

"I will do my best, and will report the result to you."

The gorgeous speculator from the East was introduced at the Dillon establishment by one of Dan's intimate friends, who had lately been enrolled in the ranks of Effie Seaver's adorers.

Mr. Thistlewood's style and flushness and liberality had their effect there as well as elsewhere, and it was only natural, after he had promoted the emptying of a few bottles of wine, that he should propose to "tackle the tiger."

This proposition was distasteful to Dan, as he was not at all fond of dealing faro.

In Bart's absence he kept the game open, as a matter of course, and occasionally dealt for the stragglers and outsiders who happened in.

But he was not an adept in the arts by which his partner was wont to manipulate the "decks," and no person could ever justly suspect him of a "brace" game or a "skin" game.

He could not reasonably refuse, however, to open a game for his guest, and he did not refuse.

The two men adjourned to the upper room, accompanied by the man who had introduced Thistlewood to the establishment.

"I want to tackle a big game, Mr. Dillon," said the stranger. "I want to be the one man against the bank, too. It is a way I have. I don't pretend to be much of a player; but I have a run of luck sometimes, and I want a big thing or nothing."

"Anything to please you," replied Dan. "That is what I am here for. The bank opens every night on ten thousand dollars, and you are welcome to win it if you can."

Thistlewood's eyes glistened, as if he already saw that sum of money pouring into his pocket.

"I have as much as that with me," said he, "and am willing to go the length of it. It is make or break between us. I give you fair warning, though, that I have broken a bank before now. That is, I did it once. I must admit that the break has usually been on the other side."

The mutual friend remarked that the affair promised to be much too lonesome for him, and he went below.

Dan Dillon produced a new pack of cards and proceeded to shuffle them.

"This is what I call a quiet and sociable game," said Thistlewood. "I am thankful, too, for the chance to play against a bank that is run by a gentleman, as I can rely upon having a square game. But it is my opinion, Mr. Dillon, on general principles, that it is safer for a stranger to fight the tiger out here than to buck against your mining sharps."

Dan inserted the cards in the case, and was ready to begin the deal, when the noise of an uproar came from below.

"Please excuse me for a moment, Mr. Thistlewood," said Dan, and he went down-stairs.

The excitement proved to be a matter of no consequence, and he returned directly, followed by the mutual friend and a few others.

In the mean time, the stranger had taken the cards from the box that was left on the table, replacing them with an exactly similar pack from his pocket.

Dan Dillon, somewhat discomposed and out-of-sorts, seated himself to deal, and the betting began.

The campaign that ensued was as furious as a thunderstorm, and as soon ended.

Eugene Thistlewood's bets were generally heavy, and on most of them he called the winning cards.

Those which he lost were comparatively small.

He kept on increasing his bets, and kept on winning, until he was ten thousand dollars ahead.

Dan Dillon, who had been dealing the cards impassively, then ceased that occupation.

"I have seen bad runs of luck," said he, "but never anything near so bad as this. Mr. Thistlewood, the bank is broke."

"I must say," observed the stranger, "that I never knew a man's own cards to break against him so. This has been a remarkable run of luck for me. Of course it can't hold; but you may open up again, Mr. Dillon, if you want to."

"Not to-night. That is against the rules of the house."

"Very well, sir. Whenever you want your revenge, let me know, and I will try to accommodate you."

"To-morrow night, Mr. Thistlewood, the same sum will be in the bank, and you will be at liberty to try for it."

But strange things were to happen before that time.

CHAPTER XV.

A KNOCK-DOWN BLOW.

EUGENE THISTLEWOOD, who was sociably inclined, did not hurry away from Dan Dillon's establishment as soon as he had broken the bank up-stairs, but remained and opened several more bottles of wine on the strength of what he termed his remarkable luck.

When he finally left there he went direct to the Longhorn Hotel, but did not go direct to his own room.

He went to the apartment of Effie Seaver.

Though the hour was late, the young woman was still up and awaiting him.

She sprung forward to meet him, all excitement and anticipation.

"Have you done it?" she eagerly demanded. "Have you succeeded? Yes, I know you have. I am sure of it. I can see it in your face. How much did you get?"

"Perhaps you are just a little bit too much excited, young lady," replied Thistlewood. "You had better cool down. There is no occasion for going crazy."

"Tell me, then, and be quick about it."

"I did succeed, Miss Seaver. I accomplished what I set out to perform, thanks to the points you gave me. I met your friend Dillon, and broke his bank—his faro-bank, you know."

"Yes, I understand. What is the sum total of the spoils?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

Effie clapped her hands, and danced about the room in the excess of her joy, while Thistlewood coolly stared at her.

"That is glorious!" she exclaimed. "It will be hard for him to stand that, as I have good reason to know. You have done splendidly, Eugene, and you may go now."

"Go?" he inquired. "Go where?"

"Back to the place you came from—anywhere away from Crosscut."

"But I don't want to go away from Crosscut just yet. I am to meet your friend Dillon again to-morrow night, and give him another whirl. I may not win as much as I have won to-night, but—"

"You will win nothing," she sharply interjected. "There will be nothing to win."

"What do you mean, Miss Seaver?"

"To-morrow night he will not have a dollar that he can call his own."

"How do you make that out?"

"I know what I am talking about, Eugene Thistlewood. You ought to be sure of that by this time. Listen! To-night a man will leave Crosscut, if he has not already left, and when he has gone there will be no more faro game for Dan Dillon."

"Do you mean to say that Dillon will run away?"

"No. But his money will."

"And that is your work, too?"

"I have promised to meet that man when he gets well away from Crosscut; but I shall not keep my promise. Somebody else will meet him."

Eugene Thistlewood bowed low.

"Permit me, Miss Seaver," he said, "to offer you my compliments. You are lovely to look upon—the most admirable woman I have had the pleasure of meeting. In my humble opinion you are a—wonder."

"Thank you, sir. That is what I want to be. So you see that there is nothing for you to gain by stopping here, and I want you to leave Crosscut at once. Good-by, Eugene, and remember me in your—will."

"How she hates that man!" muttered Thistlewood, as he walked away.

He took the first train that stopped at Crosscut—a little before daylight—and was whirled away toward the East.

The same night, but at an earlier hour and by a different route, another man left the town—a man whose departure, when it became known, created such an excitement as caused the people to forget the existence of the high-toned sport from the East.

Dan Dillon retired to rest at a late hour, and slept soundly until the morning sun was far up in the sky.

When he had eaten his breakfast he started to go to the bank to draw some money, as the last raid upon the tiger's den had used up nearly all the cash in his establishment.

As he stepped out of his door he noticed a stir in the town which was unusual at that hour; and he had gone but a little way when an excited citizen came running toward him.

"What's up now?" inquired Dan.

"The bank is broke!" shouted the man as he hurried on.

The King of Crosscut frowned as it occurred to him that this might be an ill-timed pleasantry with reference to the run on his faro bank the night before.

But he was convinced that something serious was the matter when he saw a stream of people flowing toward the bank, in front of which a crowd had already collected.

He hastened thither, and discovered that the bank was not opened.

On the closed door was tacked this written notice:

"Payments suspended on account of the disappearance of the cashier."

"A statement of the condition of the bank will be made as soon as it can be ascertained."

About the door was gathered an angry crowd, clamoring, cursing and threatening.

They made way for Dan Dillon as he passed through; but, as he was one of the directors of the bank, the remarks that greeted him were not at all friendly or complimentary.

Inside of the building he found a scene of excitement and confusion.

The officers, directors and clerks were completely demoralized, the disaster that had overtaken the bank having thrown them into a state of consternation.

The brief investigation that had already been made disclosed a robbery that could result in nothing less than ruin.

When the bank was opened in the morning the safe door was standing ajar, and the cash box was empty.

As the cashier had not come in, a messenger was sent to his boarding-place to bring him.

The messenger brought back the report that Mr. Binley had left there the previous night, saying that he was going to Cheyenne.

He had taken no baggage but a sachel.

Word was immediately sent to the president, and on his arrival the bank was closed and an investigation begun.

There could be no doubt that the cashier had been for some weeks, in the usual manner, falsifying his accounts.

But he had not been content with those petty peculations, or had feared the examination of the bank's affairs that was soon to take place, and had determined to make a clean sweep of all the available assets.

He had left nothing behind but the bills receivable of the bank, and a bundle of securities that were not negotiable.

It did not take long to discover the fact that the bank had been completely gutted, and it was necessary to inform the public of the sad condition of affairs.

Dan Dillon volunteered for that unpleasant duty, and made a speech to the crowd from the bank steps, in which he briefly made them acquainted with the full facts of the case as far as they were then known, and assured them that

nothing the directors and officers could do should be lacking to repair the disaster that had befallen the bank.

Neither the speaker nor his speech was well received, and bitter taunts and personal allusions assailed him at the close of his remarks.

"Who put Binley up to this?"

"Whose faro bank got the money?"

"Who was the cashier's pardner?"

"Somebody has got to suffer for this, and we know the man."

Though these cuts were clearly intended for him, Dan Dillon retired without replying to them.

That was not the time or place for a fight, and it was useless to argue with an angry crowd.

He need not have made any statement concerning the intentions of the directors, as their duties were pretty generally known, and it might be expected that they would be held to them.

Under the laws of the Territory the stockholders were liable to the depositors to the full extent of their stock.

As Dan Dillon was one of the largest stockholders, the draft upon his resources would be simply ruinous.

But the severest blow to him was the discovery of the fact that he had no resources to draw upon.

Not only was his balance at the bank swept away, but he had sustained a yet more serious loss.

He had been keeping in the bank safe a tin box that contained mining stocks and other securities, whose value was well up in the thousands, and on these he relied to straighten him up and pull him out of the difficulty.

But the box was no longer there.

It had disappeared with cashier Binley.

There were two other private boxes in the safe; but they had not been touched.

Then it burst upon him that the blow had been directed, not at the bank alone, but at himself personally.

Until then he had displayed no emotion; but when the loss of his box was discovered, his pale face and compressed lips told to those about him a story of disaster.

"This is a knock-down blow for me," he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DARK SCENE IN THE DRAMA.

ANOTHER act in the drama that was agitating Crosscut took place at a distance of somewhat more than fifty miles from that town.

The time was near noon of the day that had witnessed the Crosscut excitement, and the scene was a narrow pass through the hills, leading toward the West.

The stage from Belton to Grass Valley, which had passed through Crosscut the previous night, and had picked up a passenger there, was slowly lumbering westward over the rough and uncertain road, which recent heavy rains had rendered considerably worse than usual.

There were but four passengers in the rickety and uncomfortable contrivance, including the Crosscut contingent, and they and the driver were beguiling the weary way by cursing the road and the weather and everything that was cursable.

Only the gentleman from Crosscut preserved a decent reputation for quiet.

He had drawn himself back into a corner of the stage, where he sat with his coat collar up and his hat over his face, apparently unwilling to show his visage or to use his voice, and taking no visible interest in anything but the sachel which he had brought inside.

But there came a time when he was compelled to meet recognition, if there were any person about who could recognize him.

That time was when the stage reached the mouth of the pass which has been mentioned.

At that spot it was "held up."

Four men, heavily armed and of rough appearance, stepped forth from the cover of the rocks and trees, leveled their rifles at the conveyance, and ordered the driver to halt.

He was somewhat surprised and confused by this interruption as he never carried any valuables, and seldom had any passengers of monetary consequence, and had never before been bothered by the speculators of the road.

Why they should take a sudden notion to stop him and his rattletrap, was beyond his comprehension.

But there was no time for wonder, or even for argument.

He knew that the mandate that was issued over the barrels of those rifles must be instantly obeyed, especially as he recognized, from plentiful description, the leader of the gang.

That individual was a man of unusual height, whose size would at once betray him to any person who had ever heard of Blant Suffield.

He stepped to the stage, and politely requested the four passengers to come forth and be inspected.

They obeyed him readily enough, with the exception of the Crosscut contingent, who required coaxing, and who finally sought to stuff his sachel under a seat before he left the stage.

"You may as well bring it out, my friend," observed the leader of the gang. "If you should

try to hide it, somebody might think it was worth something."

"I don't know what you mean by this," grumbled the driver. "None o' you folks ever troubled me afore."

"I hope you will try to forgive us this time," courteously replied Suffield, "as it is not likely that we will ever trouble you again. Now, gentlemen, if you will have the kindness to give me your attention, we will get through with this little business as quickly and as quietly as possible."

While his comrades covered the passengers with their rifles, the leader passed them in review as they stood in a line, but passed three of them without touching them, to devote himself exclusively to the fourth, who happened to be the gentleman from Crosscut.

That individual, knowing too well that protestations and entreaties and prayers would be utterly unavailing, stood like a statue, except he trembled violently when his coat was thrown open and his person was closely searched.

His face, which was then visible enough, was pale—even ghastly—and a look of horror was there which those who saw it would not be likely to forget very soon.

When his sachel was taken from him he uttered a groan so full of anguish that it startled even the chief robber.

The spoils of which he was deprived must have been very valuable, judging by a big roll of bills that popped out of an inner pocket.

Blant Suffield carefully but rapidly stripped him bare of all his wealth, but was too generous to leave him in quite such a forlorn condition.

He handed him back a few bills, and spoke to him in a low tone.

"This," said he, "will be enough to buy you a pistol to blow out your brains with. I don't know of anything else that will do you so much good."

The victim only stared, as if not comprehending what was said.

As he seemed to be too helpless to receive the money, it was stuffed into his vest pocket.

Blant Suffield spoke again, in a yet lower tone.

"If you are expecting somebody to meet you at Grass Valley, you will be disappointed. She won't be there. You will never see her again."

The gentleman from Crosscut tottered until he nearly fell to the ground.

Blant Suffield bowed courteously to the passengers, and waved his hand to the driver.

The former re-entered the stage, and the latter mounted his seat and started the horses ahead.

The victim had stood outside, staring blankly at the departing robbers, until he was forced into the stage by his companions.

During the remainder of the journey they sympathized with him, and asked him various questions concerning the extent of his losses, but extracted from him nothing but an inarticulate mumbling.

The stage reached Grass Valley in time for supper; but he ate nothing, though he drank vigorously.

He did not sleep in a bed that night, and the next morning he was missing.

His disappearance counted for nothing in a region where missing men were common enough; but, when the stage on its next trip brought some interesting information from Crosscut, search was made for him.

He was found dead in the woods, a bullet hole in his head, and a pistol at his side.

From a description that had been widely scattered, and from evidence on his person, it was settled that the dead man was Abijah Binley, lately cashier of the Crosscut bank.

Never in this world would he be able to injure by his evidence the siren who had tempted him to his ruin.

Yet there was some suspicion in Crosscut concerning Effie Seaver.

When Binley's defalcation and robbery and flight were discovered, people began to ask what had caused such a sudden upsetting of things.

He was supposed to be a widower, was believed to be strictly honest, and had proved himself to be in all respects quite an exemplary man—for Crosscut.

In fact, he had been the chief pillar of the imported preacher's church.

He had never gambled, was a light drinker, and had no expensive habits whatever.

But he was known to have been an ardent admirer of the Queen of Crosscut, and her frequent visitor when she was in the jail and after she removed to the Longhorn Hotel.

It had been no sort of a secret that the cashier of the Crosscut bank had been infatuated with Effie Seaver.

There was, then, a woman in the case.

Had she gone off with him, to share his ill-gotten gains?

Not a bit of it.

She was still at the Longhorn Hotel, as attractive as ever, with the same innocent expression on the same child-like face.

Nobody was more astonished or more grieved

than was she when she was told of the cashier's flight.

She could not believe it, she declared again and again. It seemed to her to be utterly impossible. Such a good man! So quiet in his habits, and so religious in his life! Not the kind of man that a woman would admire, but such a sedate, sober, steady kind of a man. He had been trying to induce her to join the Rev. Mr. Paulson's church, and had almost persuaded her. And now, to think that he had committed such an extensive robbery and had run away! It was absolutely incredible.

This settled the matter as far as Effie Seaver was concerned—at least, in the minds of her admirers.

The Crosscutters in general were convinced that there was no woman in the case, and they naturally looked for another cause of the calamity.

They fastened on Dan Dillon.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DETHRONED KING.

YES, the fickle, ungrateful, and unjust populace of Crosscut settled on Dan Dillon as the partner and prompter of Abijah Binley in his evil deed.

On Dan Dillon, who had been by all odds the heaviest sufferer by the cashier's crime.

It was a fact that the absconding cashier had been the *protege*, if not the pet, of the King of Crosscut.

Dan had picked him out, penniless and ragged, from a ruck of tenderfeet who had been stranded in the town.

Believing that the man had something in him, Dan had set him at work in the bank, where Binley's faithfulness and ability had rapidly raised him until he reached the responsible position of cashier.

In every capacity he had hitherto given entire satisfaction, and everybody believed in him and trusted him.

But his robbery had caused a great revulsion in public sentiment, and he was then most hated where he had been most admired.

It was then remembered, greatly to the discredit of Dan Dillon, that he had been responsible for the rise and progress of that accomplished swindler—that he had put him in the position which gave him such a fine chance for a big haul.

The next step in the argument was easy enough to the growing prejudice of Crosscut.

It was Dan Dillon who had prompted his *protege* to commit that crime, and who was to share its proceeds.

The loss of his tin box of securities—the blow that had knocked him flat—was interpreted by his enemies as evidence against him.

As Effie Seaver remarked in her innocent way, "If all the stockholders had as good an excuse for not paying up as Mr. Dillon has, the depositors would never get a cent."

The charge that was hinted against him was that he had caused the robbery of the bank, and at the same time had caused the disappearance of his own property, to avert suspicion from himself, and to evade his responsibilities as a stockholder.

When it became known that Binley had been deprived of his plunder by Blant Suffield's gang, the argument went a little further.

It was then insinuated that the ex-King of Crosscut was in league with the outlaws.

The persons who made these charges and insinuations never repeated them to Dan.

That would not have been safe.

He was a proud man, ready and able to punish an affront, and there were still a few strong and determined men who were willing to call themselves his friends.

But he was well aware that such a feeling was floating about, and it irked him the more because he was unable to find anybody who could be held responsible for it.

Daily men scowled at him more and more, and avoided him more and more.

Daily the weight of unpopularity became more oppressive, and his life in Crosscut grew more unprofitable and burdensome.

But he went on his way steadily, trying to make the best of a bad job, striving vainly against evil fortune.

He turned into money everything he could dispose of, endeavoring to make good his liability to the depositors of the bank, and still he could not raise near enough for the purpose.

Luck was every way against him, and nothing he sold brought near its value.

If he had not lost ten thousand dollars at faro to Eugene Thistlewood, he would have been able to squeeze through, to tide his affairs over, and in time to work his way up again.

But that stroke had stripped him of his ready cash, and after that all was down-hill with him.

There was a small mortgage on his establishment—a mortgage with a power of sale—and it was in the hands of a lawyer who was one of Effie Seaver's slaves.

The last installment of interest had not been paid, owing to an inadvertence, and the time quickly came when he could not pay for it.

So the lawyer gave ten days' notice, and the Dillon saloon was sold at auction.

As nobody who was able to do so was disposed to try to pull him out of the ditch by bidding it up, it was knocked down at a ridiculously low figure.

Thus disappeared Dan's last hope of getting even with the world.

There were still debts against him, and he had nothing left with which to pay them.

He was no longer King of Crosscut.

The crown had fallen from his head, and the mantle had dropped from his shoulders.

He was dethroned, if not dishonored.

Directly after the sale of his saloon—the last straw that broke the camel's back—he received a message from Effie Seaver, requesting him to call on her at the Longhorn Hotel.

He had plenty of time on his hands just then, and he went to her immediately.

She received him alone, and was arrayed for his reception in the brightest and best of her adornments.

For his part he wore his usual neat garments and his usual look, except that he was a shade paler and thinner than he had been, recent events having worn and hardened him.

There was, too, a touch of hardness and of doubt in the woman's face, though she did her best to appear triumphant and haughty.

"And how is the King of Crosscut to-day?" she inquired, with the suspicion of a sneer, as Dan helped himself to a chair.

"If I am the man you mean," he answered, "he is quite well, I thank you."

"You have your health, then? You had better take good care of it, as it is all that is left you."

"Health and strength are great blessings, especially when accompanied by a clear conscience," replied Dan.

"Your conscience! Bah! I supposed that your conscience had been sold with your faro-room and your whisky-mill and the rest of the belongings of the King of Crosscut. Where is your throne now? and where are your subjects? In this room I told you that your crown should be torn from your head and your money and power should melt away."

"And you went on to tell me," remarked Dan, "that I would then know that it was you who stripped me and threw me out. So I suppose that it is you who have been responsible for the various calamities that have befallen me of late."

She hesitated.

However much she might wish to enjoy to the full her triumph and his humiliation, it would not do to admit, even to him, all the evil that she had had a hand in.

It would be too much like a confession of criminal conduct.

She merely wanted him to believe all that without any admission on her part.

"I did not say so," she answered. "I am not responsible for your suppositions. You may believe what you please. It is enough for me to know that the fate I predicted for you has come to pass."

"Yes, you have executed your threat. I admit that."

"And you are down."

"Not so low, though, as your poor tool, Abijah Binley, who blew his brains out. I am not likely to blow my brains out."

The blow struck home, and its effect was seen in her startled and scared look.

But she put a bold face on the matter, knowing that the evidence against her had died with Binley.

"Do you charge me with that, Mr. Dillon? Well, you may if you wish, and I will neither admit nor deny it. I am willing to admit, though, that it was I who set Eugene Thistlewood on to break your faro bank."

"And you imported him for the purpose, no doubt. You seem to be well supplied with tools, Mrs. Seaver, and your work has been thoroughly done. That is all, I believe. I can't think of anything that remains for you to do."

"Is it not enough, sir? Are you contented with it? Do you mean to hold up your head here and say that you care nothing for all this?"

"Of course I care," Dan frankly admitted.

"But it really amounts to very little. If you suppose that I cared to be called King of Crosscut, or that the loss of property is a serious trouble to me, you are not yet well acquainted with Dan Dillon. There is only one thing that hurts me, and that is the debts which I must leave behind me. But I will pay them yet."

"What do you mean to do now?" she asked.

"You have left me no choice, Mrs. Seaver. I shall shake the dust of Crosscut from my feet, strike out for a new field, and take a fresh start."

"You are going away, then?"

She spoke in a low voice, and there was a touch of tenderness in her tone, though the hardness had not died out of her face.

Then her eyes filled with tears, and she reached out her hands pleadingly.

"Don't go, Dan! Stay here with me, and let it be Effie again. You know what I can do if I will. Think what we might both accomplish, if we worked together. Don't go, Dan!"

He rose from his chair, and looked down upon her coldly.

He was indifferent before; he was scornful now.

"I think there has been enough of it," he said. "You tell me that I am down in the world; but I am sure that I shall never sink so low as to wish to be associated with you in any manner whatever. The further away I am from you, the better I will be pleased."

His quiet words had a frightful effect upon her.

Her face showed the white heat of intense anger, and fire flashed from her eyes, and her expression, usually so childlike and innocent, was absolutely demoniac.

"Do you think that you will escape me in that way?" she passionately demanded. "There was one other word that I said to you when you were last in this room. I told you that you should have me with you always, and that I would pursue you to your utter ruin."

"You have a good memory," observed Dan.

"Yes; and I meant what I said, and I shall keep my word. I will find a way to hurt you until you shall wince and cry out."

"But never ask for mercy. I leave you, Mrs. Seaver, to cultivate your remarkable memory, and to find tools for the rest of your purposes."

Before the day closed Dan Dillon had left Crosscut alone.

He was mounted on a good horse, but carried little with him besides his weapons and a small supply of money.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE KING AS A CAPTIVE.

WHEN it became known in Crosscut that Blant Suffield and his gang had met the absconding cashier and deprived him of his plunder, a vigorous campaign against those bandits was at once begun.

It was vigorous and extensive, but had no result to boast of.

Suffield and his merry men knew when to hide, and when to crawl out.

Just then they were not disposed to exhibit themselves in public.

But the hunt was over, at least for a time, and the bandits began to bestir themselves about their accustomed occupations.

It was a pleasant summer day, and they were comfortably established in a lovely valley, shut in by high hills, and shaded by trees of abundant leafage.

There, though it was a good two hours after noon, they were regaling themselves with a substantial dinner.

It was a dinner at which no epicure need turn up his nose, though lacking in the luxuries of civilized life, as they had the mountain and the forest and the water to draw upon, and Blant Suffield was particular about his cookery.

A clear brook bubbled musically through the dell; but its limpid contents were not required to aid their repast, as long as their flasks were well supplied with a more fiery and potent liquid.

In the midst of peace, and surrounded by the harmonies of nature, their thoughts were intent upon strife, and they were studious only of disturbing the existence of their fellow-men.

Into such thoughts the element of whisky entered naturally and of necessity.

As it appeared, the particular fellow-man with whom they intended to interfere just then was Dan Dillon.

"Well, boys," said the leader, as he lighted his pipe, "to-night we will go for the King of Crosscut."

"Is that goin' to pay?" inquired Jim Hokus, the man who had brought to Miller's Station the news of the capture of Effie Seaver.

"Pay? Of course it will pay. Did you ever know me to strike anything that didn't pay?"

"We didn't seem to make much by buckin' ag'inst the Crosscut jail," replied Hokus.

"Oh, that was only an outside operation, and it didn't count."

"It counted somethin' to the two men we left behind there."

"Yes; a couple of men shinned it up the golden stair mighty easy; but we filled their places without half-trying. And now, since it became known that we held up that Crosscut cashier and hived his pile, all mankind are crazy to join us. The only trouble is to keep the gang from getting to be too big."

"When are we goin' to divide that pile, Cap?" inquired a wiry little fellow who was known to his comrades as the Coyote.

"Just as soon as we can get it into the right shape, my boy," answered Blant. "There's a lot of stocks and securities to be turned into cash, and we have to be slow and cautious with that kind of goods. She thinks that she can attend to the business for us; but we will have to wait a while."

"Who's she?" asked the Coyote.

"Don't you know? The woman who put us up to the cashier scheme. We owe her a heap more than good will, and it's the least we can do to drop on Dan Dillon when she wants us to, whether there is any money in it or not."

"He is a tough subject to tackle," observed Jim Hokus.

"We have tackled tougher. Anyhow, he is only one man, and I don't believe he will show

fight. When a fellow has lost anything, it don't worry him to be held up. We will start inside of an hour, boys. I think I know about where to strike him."

So it happened that Dan Dillon, riding slowly southward in the dusk of the evening, meditating on his fallen fortunes and uncertain future, was suddenly halted by a hail that was given loudly and in no friendly tones.

His first impulse was to level his rifle and stand on the defensive, but second thoughts restrained him.

Looking ahead, he found himself confronted by a force that it would be hopeless to fight, as the odds of numbers and position were so largely against him.

There were six of them, and in the man of immense size who was evidently their leader, Dan recognized Blant Suffield.

Chuckling inwardly at the thought of the skinned wolf they had come to shear, he lowered his rifle.

"All right, pards," was his answer to the hail. "You have got the drop on me easy enough. Come and go through me. I am sorry to say that you will have a waterhaul this time, as I am flat broke."

"Cover him, boys, all the same," said Suffield, as he advanced to the traveler.

"Do you want me down there?" inquired Dan. "I don't believe there's anything about me that you care for."

"Give me your tools, anyhow, and get down. We've got a use for you."

The ex-King of Crosscut dismounted, and was thoroughly searched and disarmed.

But there seemed to be no desire on the part of his captors to take any property from his person, with the exception of his weapons.

"I suppose that is all you want of me," he remarked, when this process seemed to be complete.

"Not quite," answered Suffield. "I will have to trouble you to go with us, as we have a little business with you."

"That's queer—very queer. I can't imagine what use you can have for a man who is dead broke and has nothing to fall back on. Anything to oblige, though, and I am not pressed for time. I hope you don't want me to walk."

They did not want him to walk; they were quite too courteous and obliging for that.

He was allowed to remount his horse, and Blant Suffield rode at his side as they picked their way over the rather rough ground, making quite a sociable party.

It was a little too sociable to suit Dan Dillon.

He would have preferred to have less company, and that his companions should scatter a little more, so as to give him a chance for his liberty.

As it was, he saw no use in attempting to escape.

His captors were before him, behind him, and at each side.

They were well-armed, while he had been deprived of all his weapons, with the exception of a small but efficient revolver which they had not discovered.

His horse was a good one, much better than it looked, and he might distance them if he could get a start; but he knew that they never relaxed their vigilance, and that an attempt to break away would result at least in death to the horse.

No man could resign himself to the inevitable more gracefully and contentedly than Dan Dillon could.

Satisfied that he must remain a captive, but still keeping a weather eye out for chances, he settled himself to his position, and began a conversation with the big man at his side.

"I hope," he said, "that you don't hold any hard feelings against me about that Crosscut jail affair."

"Not a feeling," answered Blant. "That was your business, I suppose, and you had to attend to it. I was only puzzled to know how you got news of our coming."

"At that time I had ways of finding out things. But you are ahead of me now. You seem to get your news very quick and straight. I think I can guess, though, how the trick is done."

"What's your guess?"

"A smart woman is a useful ally, especially when she is young and pretty and not troubled with a conscience. I would like to know how she got word to you about that runaway cashier, so as to give you such a fine chance to scoop him in."

"There's a heap of things you would be glad to know, which you ain't likely to find out."

"I am sure of one thing, though, Blant Suffield. I know that you must have got quite a pile of my property when you went through the cashier. He carried away a lot of stocks and other papers of mine, which you might as well give back to me, as they can't be of any use to you or to her."

"You may as well leave her alone, Mr. Dan Dillon. You can guess and wonder as much as you want to; but there's only one thing you can be certain of, and that is that we've got you, and you must go with us. As for giving back prop-

erty that we have honestly earned, you ought to know our style better than to expect that, though I admire your gall in asking it."

Dan was conducted to the hiding-place which Suffield's gang had occupied during the recent search for them.

It was a commodious hole in the rocks in the heart of a wild and mountainous district, and the prisoner judged, by the route and the distance from the spot where he was captured, that it could not be more than fifty miles from Crosscut.

CHAPTER XIX.

LOVE OR DEATH.

SKINNY MIKE was not one of the most illustrious or admirable of the inhabitants of Crosscut.

He was a poverty-stricken and thriftless lad who had drifted thither from nobody knew where, and possibly his own ideas on that point were not very clear.

Perhaps his dissolute and scampish parents, kicked from town to town and from camp to camp as suspicious characters, had left him behind in one of their hasty exits, or had abandoned him on the road because of their unwillingness to bother with him any longer.

If he had ever had any parents, he made no mention of them, and no person was permitted to penetrate the mystery of his past existence.

His present existence was almost as much of a mystery as his past.

Since he stranded on the usually hospitable shore of Crosscut he had been a soggy and uncleanly stick of timber which nobody cared to pick up or even to touch.

Nobody wanted to give him steady work, and he was not willing to do steady work for anybody.

He lived by odd jobs, which were so few and so scantily paid, that everybody wondered how he managed to keep soul and body together.

But he not only succeeded in that, but managed to keep his skin pretty well filled with the vilest liquor that Crosscut afforded.

As for clothes, it might be safely affirmed that he never wasted any money in that way.

It was admitted that he must be smart, as he got along, after his fashion, without begging, and it could only be suspected that he stole his way through the world.

If he stole, it could not be denied that he was smart, as he was never caught at it.

After Effie Seaver's arrival in Crosscut times seemed to have somewhat improved with Skinny Mike.

His apparel had not benefited by any change in his fortunes; but he was evidently well grubstaked, and his supply of whisky was always equal to the demand.

It was noticed that he occasionally had business at the Longhorn Hotel with Miss Seaver, and that had a queer look to some people; but she explained it naturally enough, saying that she was sorry for the poor fellow, and therefore employed him to do errands whenever she could.

It seems that one of his errands brought him to her at a very early hour in the morning, before the young lady had arisen.

When he informed the clerk that he wanted to see Miss Seaver, that official was inclined to chaff him.

"Perhaps you had better send in your card, young gentleman," said he. "The lady is not up yet, and she won't be up for an hour or so. Shall I have a private parlor prepared for your reception while you are waiting?"

"Jest you see that she gits up," ordered Skinny. "That's what you're paid fur, I reckon."

"But it is too early in the day for a lady to drink, and a sniff of your breath might knock her over."

"You don't need to gimme none o' your lip, mister," retorted the lad. "Let her know right away that Skinny Mike is here, or you'll ketch partic'lar fits. Them's the words with the bark on."

The clerk did send up to Miss Seaver's apartment, and caused her to be aroused and informed concerning her early visitor.

She threw on a wrapper, and ordered that Skinny Mike should be sent up to her.

"He's got him, miss," was the lad's brief communication.

"Has he?" she replied, as her eyes glistened with delight. "Of course he has. Did he say that I was to come?"

"I'm to take you out thar, mum."

"Very well. I will be ready to start as soon as I can get my breakfast. Where shall I meet you?"

"In the timmer near Jimsey's."

"I know the place. Here is some money, Mike, and I want to tell you that you musn't drink so much whisky that it will make you tumble off your horse."

"Don't you be afeard o' that, miss. Thar ain't enough whisky in Crosscut to down me, and don't you forgit it."

Within an hour a good saddle horse was brought to the hotel for Effie Seaver, and she

mounted and rode away alone after informing the clerk that she was going out to the Seaver ranch, and might stay there until the next day.

At a little distance outside of the town was a small patch of woods, from which Skinny Mike, mounted on a fair horse, issued and joined her.

They rode on together silently, for the most part, and as rapidly as the nature of the route would allow, as they avoided roads and even trails, picking their path through woods and ravines, and over hills and ridges, as if they wished to keep out of the way of any possible observation.

Shortly before the day closed, and when they seemed to be tangled up inextricably in the hills, Skinny Mike turned into a narrow and dark glen, almost impassable for their horses.

It widened presently into a basin that contained a few trees and some grass, where a number of horses were tethered.

Skinny Mike and his companion dismounted, leaving their animals with the others, and crossed to the other side of the basin, where they were met by Blant Suffield.

He had just issued from a hole in the rocks, and he greeted the young woman with great politeness and warmth, seeming to be overjoyed at seeing her there.

"This is a great honor to me, Effie, and a great pleasure," he said. "It almost makes me hope that the old times will come back, and that things will be as they used to be."

"Enough of that," she answered sharply. "What have I to do with you?"

"Am I not your husband?"

"Of course you are not. You know that I got a divorce from you long ago. Business has brought me here, and I want to attend to my business at once. I understand that you have caught my bird."

"Caught him and caged him, my dear, and ever since I have had him I have been longing to slit his windpipe, or at least to pull out his feathers."

"That is not what I wish you to do, and I warn you that you had better be content with following my directions. What we have to do with each other, Blant, is plain and simple enough. I am to help you, and you are to help me. Stick to that, and nothing but that. I have done well by you so far, and I want you to keep your part of the contract. Take me to him."

The big man bowed submissively, and led the way into the hole in the rocks.

It might once have been the den of a gang of grizzly bears, and was hardly enough of a hole to be styled a cave; but it was passably comfortable, as the gang had made it their home for quite a while.

There was enough of it, however, to be divided into two apartments, the partition having been made by nature.

In the larger and outer apartments were a few of Blant Suffield's comrades, and the inner and smaller one was the present abode of Dan Dillon.

Suffield requested the men to leave there, and went out with them, while the young woman crawled into the prisoner's apartment.

The ex-King of Crosscut had been as well treated by his captors as the circumstances attending his confinement would allow.

They had given him plenty to eat and drink, had made him as comfortable as their means permitted, had conversed with him, played cards with him, and generally given him a fairly good time, always bearing in mind the point that he must be carefully kept a prisoner.

Whether the gang were in the den or out of it, he was never left without an armed guard in his own apartment, and he was generally aware of the presence of others outside.

He was well kept, but closely watched, and had plenty of leisure time to wonder why he was detained there.

More than one member of the gang besides the leader were known to him, personally or by name; but there was one whom he was surprised to see there.

That one was Bert Edes, the youth who, it may here be admitted, had been sent away from Crosscut by Dan Dillon, to avoid the evidence that he might have given against Effie Seaver.

Though Bert Edes had been called a boy, he was a well-grown young fellow of nineteen or thereabout, strong, active, and fairly intelligent.

Dan had taken an interest in the lad, had given him money, and had directed him where to go and get work; but here he found him, a member of the worst gang of scoundrels the region could boast.

He wanted to speak to young Edes, and to ask him how he had happened to take up with Blant Suffield; but Bert avoided him, and never gave him the chance of a word.

A fire was kept in the prisoner's apartment, to kill the dampness and give light, and it was burning brightly when Effie crawled in.

One of the gang who was on guard there rose to go away; but she motioned him to remain.

Dan Dillon received her with cold and sarcastic politeness.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Seaver—or good-morning, whichever it may be. It is not so easy to be sure of the time in this place. I am sorry that I

have not a chair to offer you, but this blanket may help you to a comfortable seat."

"You are surprised to see me here, I presume," she remarked as she seated herself.

"Surprised? No, not exactly. Nothing surprises me these days."

"And you are not pleased, perhaps?"

"I don't know. It matters little to me. I have no choice, you perceive, and it would be useless to grumble. Even your company may be better than none."

"I see that you are as insolent as ever," she said, as her cheek flushed with anger.

"You may say so if you choose. The events of the past few days have not been calculated to make one softer or sweeter. I have been at a loss to know, Mrs. Seaver, why I was captured and kept in this hole; but your presence here explains it. I perceive that I am here for your pleasure, or, at least, for your interest."

"You have been brought here, sir, to give you a chance to come to your senses."

"Is that it? It seems to me that I have my wits about me; but I may be mistaken. How am I to find them, if they are lost?"

"You have felt my power, Dan Dillon. You have seen what I can do when I choose to work my will, and there is more behind. Think of what we might do together. We could at least rule this corner of the world. Come back to me, Dan!"

It was substantially the same appeal that she had made to him before; but it affected him even less than then.

Nothing could be clearer than the fact that she loved him and hungered for him, and that she hated him intensely when she felt that she had forever lost his love.

"I admit your power," he answered, "but I do not envy you the style of that power or the means by which you get hold of it. To be in league with these men is nothing to brag of. But, as the leader of the gang is your husband—"

"How do you know that?" she sharply interrupted.

"I got it from the same source that informed me of his intention to rescue you from the Crosscut jail. Since then I have been wondering how many husbands you have."

"He is not my husband. I got a divorce from him, and I am free now. There must be an end of this, Dan, in one way or another. Will you come back to me?"

"Yes, you are free," answered Dan, and his voice just then was as harsh as the fling of a saw. "You are free, and you have various ways of getting your freedom. Your last husband died suddenly, and some people persist in saying that he died suspiciously. I prefer that you should not try any experiments on me. I prefer to live."

Her face was then white, and in the flickering firelight it looked absolutely ghastly.

"Do you fancy that I will allow you to live?" she passionately demanded. "I have power over you, and you know that I have the nerve to use it. Which would you rather, Dan Dillon—marry me, or die?"

"Give me a harder one," lightly replied Dan.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that your conundrum is too easy. Of course I would rather die, and so would any man who had a spark of honor left in his breast."

"Then you shall die!"

The woman was fairly beside herself with rage, and vindictive hate showed itself in every feature and motion.

In shrill and angry tones she called Blant Suffield, and the big man squeezed himself into the small apartment.

"Will you hang this man for me in the morning, Blant?" was her quiet inquiry.

"With the greatest pleasure," he answered, smiling broadly. "It will suit me exactly to string him up to the best tree I can find, for my sake, as well as for yours. Then we will both be rid of him."

"Permit me to suggest, Mrs. Seaver," mildly remarked Dan Dillon, "that the brigands of Italy have a better way of managing such matters. When the ransom for a captive is not forthcoming, they begin by cutting off an ear, and so they gradually mutilate him until he is not worth the amount. Would not that scheme please you?"

"You carry it off bravely," said she. "We shall see how you act when the rope is around your neck."

"I think you will find me about the same man that I was when I saved your neck from the rope. But that don't count."

"You will have the night to think it over, Dan Dillon. You shall die in the morning, unless—"

"Oh, there is no unless about it."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MOUSE AND THE LION.

Two guards were put in Dan Dillon's apartment that night.

As in the case of a prisoner condemned to be executed by process of law, a death watch was set.

He recognized this precaution as a surety of the intention of his captors to put him to death

in the morning; but that did not worry him, as he had already accepted the situation.

He was surprised, and perhaps a little pleased at seeing that Bert Edes was one of his guards.

As he was about to die, perhaps the lad might be willing to talk to him a little.

But this proved to be a vain thought, as Bert still avoided him, and even refused to answer when addressed by him.

After a while it transpired that young Edes had a flask of liquor, and that he was liberal in sharing its contents with his companion, who was not so well supplied.

Dan Dillon, always observing and sharp sighted, also perceived that the lad scarcely sipped the liquor, while he encouraged the other guard to drink heavily.

This roused the prisoner's wonder at first, and then it began to excite his hope.

As the hours wore on, the hole in the rock became quiet, except for the snoring of the men in the outer apartment, and the muttered conversation of the two guards.

The voice of the older one grew husky, and he was evidently becoming stupid and drowsy from the effects of his continual sucking at the flask, while the younger one was fully awake and alert.

As the elder guard's head drooped on his breast, Bert Edes pointed a thumb at him, and winked a most significant wink.

That wink had a world of meaning for the prisoner, and his hope went up like a rocket.

He started to speak to the lad, but Bert signed to keep silence, and cautiously peered out into the larger apartment.

All was tranquil there, and in the lesser hole the other guard was beginning to add his snores to those of his comrades.

Dan Dillon might easily have choked him into an eternal silence, or might have gagged him without raising any excitement; but anything of that kind was unnecessary if Bert Edes's purpose was what Dan supposed it to be.

His purpose proved to be friendly.

After completing his survey of the sleeping gang, he turned and whispered to Dan.

"Now's your time, Dan Dillon. Go out as softly as you can, and be sure you don't tumble over any o' them fellers. Your hoss has got his saddle on."

"What will become of you?" inquired Dan.

"I'll foller you. Never mind me."

Dan could not help admiring the courage and self-sacrificing spirit of the lad, who sent him out first, reserving for himself the chance of being caught by his comrades and punished for his treachery.

But there was no time to waste in argument or reflection, and he addressed himself to the task of passing through the outer apartment and getting clear.

It was not a difficult feat for a man of Dan Dillon's skill and determination.

There was light enough to enable him to see the forms of the sleeping outlaws, scattered about on the rocky floor, and in a corner he thought he perceived Effie Seaver coiled up on a pile of blankets.

As softly and silently as a cat could move he stepped among them and over them, and passed like a shadow out into the open air.

There he waited for the exit of Bert Edes.

The lad was close behind; but there was an obstacle in his way.

"Who's that?" gruffly demanded Blant Suffield, as he awoke from a heavy sleep.

"Only me," answered Bert.

"Who's me?"

"Bert Edes, from the inside."

"Where are you going to?"

"Jest outside for a minute. Jim Hokus is watchin' that feller."

"Come back quick, you young scamp."

"All right, Cap," said Bert, and he stepped outside and joined Dan Dillon.

Dan quickly found his horse, and Bert took one which, though unsaddled, was hitched by its bridle.

Born and bred on the plains among the cattle, he cared nothing for a saddle, and his thorough knowledge of horseflesh enabled him to pick out a splendid animal.

They led their horses as quietly as possible across the basin and through the narrow glen into the tangle of hills outside, where they mounted, Dan catching the lad by the heel and flinging him up on his horse.

The night was very dark, and the way out of that tangle was no easy matter to find.

"Do you know what to do now?" asked Dan.

"Bet yer bottom dollar on that. Foller me, Mr. Dillon, and watch the hoss keerfully, so's not to lame him."

Hardly had they started when they heard loud voices at the place they had left.

They knew then that their flight had been discovered, and that Blant Suffield's men would speedily pursue them.

But the darkness, at which Dan had been disposed to grumble a moment ago, was a strong point in their favor.

Bert Edes had only to speak to his horse, and he flew away like a bird—a bat, for instance, into the thickness of the night, over the rough and broken ground, climbing ridges, traversing

ravines, and making nothing of the intricacies of that most difficult region.

Onward he sped, apparently as easily and as sure of his way as if he had been on a traveled road in broad daylight.

Dan Dillon, though no slouch of a horseman, and practiced in all manner of rough riding, found himself forced to do his best to keep up with Bert, and was soon compelled to give his horse the rein and allow him to follow his leader in his own way.

But they quickly got out of hearing of the voices of their foes, and it was not likely that they could be effectively pursued in the darkness.

This rough travel was kept up for half an hour or so, at the end of which time they were out of the tangle of hills and on the edge of a vast plain that stretched southward further than they could have seen in the daylight.

There Bert Edes halted, and gave his horse a chance to rest a moment.

"Which way do you want to go, Mr. Dillon?" he asked.

"South," Dan answered concisely.

The horses' heads were turned in that direction, and they bounded over the plain together as if they enjoyed the run.

CHAPTER XXI.

ZANITA.

"You have saved my life, my young friend," said Dan Dillon, as he galloped away at the side of the lad.

"Think so? I didn't allow that 'twas so bad as that."

"They would have strung me up in the morning if you had not turned me loose."

"Mebbe not. Reckon she might ha' took a notion by that time to let up on you."

"Perhaps so; but she might have got angry and changed her notion again. In a mad fit she would do the worst she could, and Blant Suffield would be only too glad to help her."

"Thar's no tellin'. But she's a born devil, and that's a solid fact."

"I am convinced, Bert, that it was very lucky for me that you happened to be there and willing to help me out. I was greatly surprised at finding you there, too. I thought you had gone to work with Ben Walker, the man I gave you a letter to."

"That's the place I started fur, Mr. Dillon. I meant honest enough, and it ain't my style to make a livin' by robbery and murder. But Blant Suffield met me on the road and gobbled me up. From what I've sence heerd, in one way an' another, I've a notion that she put him up to it, jest as she set him on you and the cashier."

"It is quite likely," observed Dan, "and the only wonder is that they didn't kill you, so as to get you quite out of the way."

"Mebbe that wasn't wuth while, sence 'the trial was over, and she had gone clear. But they did mean to keep me, and they held me tight, fur a fact. I wanted to git away powerful bad, but never had the ghost of a chance, and I'd sorter gi'n the thing up when they took you. Then I saw that thar was two of us, and thought that if we could slide off together, you'd be apt to help me. I was stud in' on it, without seein' my way a bit clear, until she came. When I found out what a bad box you was in, I knew the time had come to make a break, fur life or death, and I went in fur all I was wuth. They put me on guard with Jim Hokus, and you know how I played the game."

As the two fugitives rode southward, they stopped now and then to look back and listen; but their looking and listening brought them no evidence of approaching pursuit.

"You played it splendidly," said Dan, "and I owe you my life, as I said. I owe you more than that, as it would have been worse than death to die in that woman's clutches. I don't know how I am going to pay my debts, Bert, but hope to open a way. Just now I am flat broke, and must make a strike somewhere and somehow."

"You don't owe me nothin', Mr. Dillon, and I mean to stick to you if you will let me."

"Glad to have you with me, Bert, wherever I go, and whatever I do. We will push on together, and I have no fear for the future."

Day soon began to dawn, and over the hills at the east the sky flushed red before the rising sun.

A gray light glimmered over the vast plain, and spread and grew brighter until they could see far ahead and far behind them.

The view behind them just then was interesting, though not inviting.

In the distance there were faintly visible some moving spots which they soon made out to be mounted men.

"They have struck our trail!" exclaimed Dan.

"That don't need to worry us," replied the lad. "Thar ain't one of 'em that's got a hoss that can git nigh yours or mine; except the boss, and he's a heap too heavy a weight fur a race."

It was well for the fugitives that their horses

were good ones, as they would have been at a great disadvantage in a fight with their pursuers.

Not only would the odds in numbers have been largely against them, but they were also most destitute of weapons.

Dan Dillon had been disarmed at the time of his capture of everything but a small revolver.

Bert Edes also had a revolver, but had not been able to bring away his rifle, which was in a corner of the hole in the rock where his late comrades slept.

Dan had a lariat coiled at his saddle-bow; but that could hardly be called a weapon, though it might be useful in procuring food for himself and his young friend on their journey.

So they put their horses to their speed, and swept southward over the plain so swiftly that the dark specks behind them dwindled and soon disappeared from their sight.

No longer fearing any pursuit, they were then able to turn their attention to the questions of the route they should take, and of their subsistence on the route.

Bert Edes, who was better acquainted than his companion was with the region of country they expected to traverse, naturally took the lead and directed their course.

He knew that there were magnificent sheep and cattle-ranges along the slopes at the base of the Rockies, and believed that before hunger overcame them they would be able to find a ranch where they could "fodder up."

In this belief he was not disappointed.

It was not yet noon when they reached the rude but hospitable home of a ranchman, who welcomed them warmly when he discovered that they had no hostile intentions.

Their story was a simple and not unusual one.

Without going into any details of their past lives or recent adventures, they merely said that they had fallen in with robbers, who had stripped them of their arms and other property, and from whom they had finally escaped without recovering anything of what they had lost.

They were on their way to the Gunnison country, where a rich mining region had been reported, hoping to make a strike there, or at least to find work that would enable them to live.

The ranchman confirmed from his own hearsay the reports they had heard of the lower country, and greedily drank in such news as they could give him of other portions of the big world.

He could not furnish them with any arms, having no more than he needed for his own use; but he enabled them to "fodder up" to their entire satisfaction, and supplied them with as much provisions as they cared to carry.

Thus they worked their way down into the Grand river country, where they found themselves in a network of mountains and canyons, delightfully mingled with spreading mesas and fertile reaches of river-bottom.

No signs of civilization were visible anywhere in that region, and they had not struck a ranch since leaving the one at which they had procured provisions.

That supply had run out, and they perceived the necessity of keeping their eyes open for some sort of game that might come within pistol range or lasso reach.

The kind of game they found was such as they were not looking for.

It was two hours after noon, and they had got no dinner, when something happened that led to the ending of the journey and the satisfying of their appetites.

As they were following the bed of a creek, passing through a small canyon which the little stream had cut in the red rock, they heard a scream just ahead of them.

It was a woman's voice, and the scream was a cry of terror, if not of pain.

Dan Dillon urged his horse out of the canyon, and came at once upon a scene that surprised and excited him.

The canyon debouched upon a lovely plain through which the creek flowed, with scattered trees on each side, and a luxuriant growth of grass under the trees.

Down the gentle southward slope of the plain a girl was running in a manner that indicated extreme terror.

Dan perceived the cause of her terror as soon as he emerged from the canyon.

It was a large panther, of the species known as the Rocky Mountain lion, which had sprung from a high above to a spur of the hill just at the left of the canyon.

The spring had doubtless been intended for the capture of the girl, but the beast had missed her.

It made a spring from the spur just as Dan Dillon caught sight of it.

This time it alighted on the plain, but still fell short of the girl, who screamed again as the big beast struck the ground.

Dan had quickly snatched the lariat from his saddle-bow, and was ready for action.

It was the only weapon he had that could be depended upon, and it was necessary that he should make the best possible use of it.

He checked his horse as the panther crouched for a third spring, and flung out the snaky coil.

Just as the beast was rising the noose settled over its head, and tightened around its throat, throwing it over on the ground, where it began to claw at its neck and at the air, in frantic efforts to escape from an enemy which it could not understand.

Dan hailed the flying girl.

"Don't run! You are safe now."

She halted and turned around, her surprise overcoming her terror.

Seeing two mounted white men there, one of whom was tall and fine-looking, she made the halt a full stop, and stood gazing at the strange encounter between man and beast.

Suddenly the panther started to dash away; but the horse stood firm, and it stopped yet more suddenly.

Then it grabbed the lariat with its claws, and began to haul itself rapidly toward the horse and its rider.

Dan, who was prepared for this maneuver, gave his trembling and snorting horse the rein, and the good steed galloped over the plain, dragging the beast, which spit and clawed as it went bounding and tumbling over the turf.

The stout rawhide rope was equal to the strain, and it might be expected that the panther would be choked to death, or have the breath knocked out of its body.

But the tough beast still showed so much life and viciousness that Dan was compelled to call Bert Edes to his assistance.

As the lad ranged alongside and fired a couple of shots into the common enemy, Dan halted, drew his small revolver, and began a fusillade on his own account.

Thus they quieted the frantic beast, but were obliged to empty the entire charges of the revolvers into its hide before it was dead enough to allow the lariat to be removed.

Then the horsemen dismounted, and turned their attention to the girl, who had stood there quietly, awaiting the termination of the struggle.

She was an object well worthy of their attention, and they gazed at her admiringly as they approached her.

Evidently she was of Mexican birth, a fact attested by her features and her complexion, as well as by her dress.

Of an age that might be guessed at as nineteen, but was quite likely to be two years less, she was small and lithe of figure, as graceful as a fawn, and with large dark eyes that illuminated her peachy cheeks and raven black hair.

Her attire was thoroughly Mexican, with not the least compromise in favor of the styles of the Gringos—a short skirt of red and black stripes, a close-fitting bodice of the same with gold and silver ornaments, sleeves that left her arms half bare, a headdress of black lace that was an ornament rather than a covering, and shoes of deerskin that laced well up on her neat ankles.

Such is a brief sketch of the rare and fair specimen of womankind who had awaited the slaying of the panther that had frightened her.

She spoke to Dan as he approached her, speaking good English, but with a Spanish or Mexican accent.

"You are very good, sir," she said with a smile. "I am afraid that I would have been killed by that ugly beast, if you had not come to my help."

"We were very glad of the chance. But I am surprised at finding you here, where I had not expected to see a white face, or even a red one."

"Mine is not so very white. I am here because I live near here, with my father and Senor Camarado."

"May I ask your name?"

"Of course you may. It is Zanita Castana. If you will go home with me, my father will be glad to see you and thank you for having saved the life of his chiquita."

"We will gladly go with you," said Dan, and he walked on at the side of the girl, leading his horse and followed by Bert.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE RANCH AT SECRET GULCH.

"WHERE is Zanita?"

"It was an old man who addressed this question to a man of middle age as they sat in front of a low adobe house.

The house was situated in a lonely valley between two high hills, and not far from the mouth of one of the most wonderful canyons of a region that abounds in those remarkable examples of the forces of nature.

Of course the valley was beautified by a brook, a stream nearly large enough to be called a creek, the same apparently insignificant instrument that in ages past had cut that deep and narrow channel in the rock.

The fertile slopes that led from the foot of the hills to the brook were only here and there wooded, the timber having been cut away to make room for agricultural operations, which had been conducted there for years, judging by the condition of the fencing and the apparent age of the house and its outbuildings.

The cultivation, however, varied, and careful as it was, was evidently not so much for the pur-

pose of profit, as for the support and comfort of the cultivators.

A few horses and cattle were scattered about, feeding on the luxuriant grass; but there was not so much as the beginning of a marketable herd.

He who asked the whereabouts of Zanita was a very old man, to judge by his appearance.

He was lame and bent, and his face was entirely covered by a heavy gray beard, while his hair, rather more scanty, was long and as white as snow.

His companion, who appeared to be some two score years younger than he, was evidently a Mexican, though his stout and serviceable garments had scarcely a trace of the creature of his native land.

"Where is Zanita?" said the latter, repeating the question of his companion. "Surely, friend Camarado, she cannot be far away. She has rambled down the brook, I suppose, to look for wild flowers, or perhaps she has gone to fish in the creek below. You know how fond she is of fishing."

"She is safe, I trust. I hope she is. But I am always troubled, Senor Castana, by the fear that she may be lost, or that some accident may happen to her. I have grown to love the dear child so much that it would kill me if any evil should befall her. I shall never forget the time when she saved my life, or at least brought me where I could have a chance to live."

"Nor can I ever forget that time, Senor Camarado, as she then brought me the best and dearest friend I have ever known. How well I remember the day when you came tottering down the valley, leaning on the shoulder of my Zanita, who told me that she had found you wandering and stumbling about the mouth of the canyon, wounded, sick, and nearly starved to death."

"And then her father took me into his hospitable home, and fed me, and cured me, and gave me the peace and happiness which I had feared I would never find anywhere in this world."

"But how largely you have repaid us both, my friend! When, after you had regained your health and strength, you told me of what you had found in the canyon there, how I opened my eyes! I could not believe it possible until Zanita and I went in there with you, and you proved to us the truth of what you had said. Long as I had lived here, I had never dreamed of finding gold in these hills, and would not have known how to look for it if I had believed it to be there."

And then, friend Castana, before we began the work we solemnly promised each other that we would keep the find a close secret, not only on account of the gold—

"Not only on account of the gold, nor mainly on account of the gold, but for the sake of our peaceful home. If the fact had become known this valley would quickly have been overrun by miners and prospectors and speculators, and all the roughs and rascals that follow in their wake, and Zanita and I could have lived here no longer."

"Yet it is a good thing," mused the old man, "that we have been able to dispose of the gold without revealing our secret. You do not need the money, nor do I, but it may be of use to Zanita some day. Besides you and that dear child there is nobody in the world who cares for me, or for whom I care, though there was a time when I was of some consequence, and when I believed that I possessed love and all that a man could wish."

"I have had no doubt, my friend, that your life has been a busy and eventful one. When Zanita brought you here, and you told me that your name was Camarado, I knew that you had assumed it, because it was not the name of a man, and you were neither a Spaniard nor a Mexican. But you have been my true and dear comrade, and the name suits you, and I have no wish to pry into the secrets of your past life."

"Let the past be past, brother Castana. I have begun a new life here—short though it may be—and I seldom give a thought to the old life. I do not regret what I have lost, and would not claim it again if I could. But I am troubled about the child, Castana. Where can she be? What keeps her away so long?"

"I am beginning to get uneasy, too. I will send Jose for her. No—he is at work in the canyon. I will send Zip."

The Mexican sounded a silver whistle, and a large hound came bounding toward him.

When the beautiful creature reached his master, he stood in an attitude of attention, as if waiting for orders.

"Go seek Zanita," said Castana, pointing down the valley.

The hound ran away, with his nose to the ground; but soon went bounding down the valley on the trail it had struck.

"We will soon hear from her now," said the Mexican. "Nobody could find her as quickly as Zip can, and nobody could more plainly tell her that she is wanted."

His words were soon proved true by the short and joyful note of the hound's bark.

"Zip has found her," said he, "and is glad to

see her. You may be sure that she is safe, or we would hear a different tune from him."

Shortly Zip came in sight, leaping forward and running backward, after the manner of his kind.

Then Zanita appeared, and with her were two men, one leading his horse at her side, and the other riding a little in the rear.

"Strangers!" exclaimed Senor Castana, rising to get a better view of the approaching party.

"What can this mean?" demanded the old man in a tone of displeasure.

"I cannot tell you; Zanita must surely have known that we do not wish to see any strangers here."

They had not long to wait for the information.

As the strangers drew nearer it was seen that one of them was a tall and fine-looking young man, neatly dressed, and with an air of intelligence and good breeding.

The other, who rode a little in the rear, was a strapping young fellow, roughly attired, and with nothing noticeable in his appearance.

Zanita, who stepped forward in advance of her companions, perceived at once the displeasure that was visible in the faces of her father and his friend.

"Why, *padre mio*," she said, as she bestowed a bright smile upon each of them, "you must not frown at my friends. They have saved my life."

"Saved your life?" they both exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed. But for them I would not be here now, but would have been torn to pieces by, ah! such a savage beast. The horrid creature was about to spring upon me when this gentleman checked it. They both killed it; but I would have been lost if it had not been for him."

"Then we owe them a world of thanks," said the old gentleman.

"And they are more than welcome here," added Senor Castana.

"It was an easy thing for us to do, and we ran no risk," said Dan Dillon. "We happened to be in the right place at the right time, and were glad of the chance to be of service to the young lady."

"But how was it, my friend? What kind of a beast attacked her? How did you kill it? I see no weapons."

"It was one of the big panthers that are bred in these mountains. I rode up and threw my lariat as it was about to spring, and so I held it until we could kill it with our revolvers."

"And they have had nothing to eat, *padre mio*," broke in Zanita, "and they must be very hungry indeed."

"They shall have the best the house affords, my child, and our most heartfelt and fervent thanks will go with it. Run in, Nita, and give directions to Manuela."

The strangers were requested to hitch their horses, and were assured that the animals would be well cared for.

Seats were offered them; but Dan Dillon had a word to say before he accepted any further hospitality.

"I would never have thought to find a ranch here," he remarked. "I suppose that you are not accustomed to strange faces."

"That is true," replied Castana. "We are quite out of the world, and never see any but our own people."

"Then it is natural that you should be suspicious of strangers, and I ought to tell you who we are and why we are here. We were traveling in this direction, when we were pounced upon by a gang of robbers, some two days' journey to the northward. We finally escaped from them, but were compelled to leave behind all our weapons except the revolvers with which we killed the panther. So we had a pretty hard time working our way down here, and I don't know what we would have done if we had not found this ranch. We are not robbers, ourselves, but fairly honest and decent people, who are looking for a chance to earn a living. My name is Dan Dillon, lately of Crosscut."

The old man, who had been regarding the strangers closely and curiously, took a yet more lively interest in them at that moment.

"What name?" he sharply asked, "and from what place?"

"Dan Dillon, from Crosscut."

"And your friend's name?"

"Bert Edes, a herder, from the cattle ranges generally."

Zanita came running out to tell the strangers that the refreshments they needed were already awaiting them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE KING IN EXILE.

THE two strangers were easily persuaded to pass the night at Senor Castana's comfortable home, and the old man who called himself Camarado took a strong interest in Dan Dillon and his companion.

In the evening, when they were enjoying the balmy air in front of the adobe house, he put many questions, concerning themselves, to both of them, but especially to Dan Dillon.

He was so inquisitive, indeed, that though Dan did not really resent his personal queries, he got

into the way of answering them curtly, or avoiding them altogether.

Mr. Camarado, perceiving this disposition on the part of the young man, went a step further.

"I suppose you consider me very inquisitive," said he; "but I want to know more about you. I know something about you already. I have heard before now of a Dan Dillon, who was said to be a successful man, and whom men called the King of Crosscut. Are you not that man?"

"I am," answered Dan, somewhat surprised.

"I thought so, and now, as you seem to be down in the world, I would like to know what has brought you down. It is not mere inquisitiveness that prompts me to ask the question, but an honest desire for your welfare."

"I suppose I had better make a clean breast of it," said Dan. "Within a short time I have lost all I had in the world, and owe more than I am able to pay."

"It is strange that such a successful man should so suddenly become ruined, and I want to know what caused your loss."

"A woman."

Zanita, who was seated on a low bench near the handsome stranger, watching him and listening to him eagerly, started at this word, and her face flushed.

"A woman!" she faintly muttered with a pained look in her eyes.

"A woman," said Dan, "who had, as I believe, murdered her husband, to whom she had recently been married. She was brought to Crosscut, where she was imprisoned, tried, and acquitted. I had something to do with securing her acquittal; but she turned against me, after the trial, for reasons of her own, and since then ill fortune has followed me."

"Now we are getting into the facts," said the old man, and he continued his questions until Dan was persuaded to tell the entire story of his recent troubles.

"And now," said the old man again, "the young woman, I suppose, is queening it there in Crosscut, and scattering her dead husband's money in the liveliest manner."

"I can't say about that," answered Dan. "A nephew of his turned up there, who may deprive her of at least a part of it."

"Perhaps, Mr. Dillon, there is not much to choose between them, and it is a matter of little consequence which of them has the spending of the money."

That night Senor Castana and his old friend had a consultation, and they were both present the next morning when Dan Dillon, declaring his intention of continuing his journey, inquired the distance to the nearest mining-camp.

"The nearest is Castro," answered the Mexican, "and that is about fifty miles from here."

"We must get on to Castro then," remarked Dan, "though I am sorry to leave such comfortable quarters and such kind hosts."

"Perhaps you don't need to be in such a hurry or to go quite so far," remarked the old man.

"You say that you want to find work and make a living."

"I want a little more than that," replied Dan.

"A mere living would not be sufficient for me. I hope to make a strike when I get into the mining region."

"Perhaps you might make it here. You will need a start. Perhaps we can give it to you."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Dan in a tone of extreme surprise. "What possible chance for anything of the kind can there be about here?"

"More than you might suppose. I am free to say that I have taken a liking to you, young man, not only because of what I have heard of you before now, but because of what I have seen of you here. So has Senor Castana. He is my partner. What do you suppose we are partners in?"

"This ranch?" suggested Dan.

"Something more than that. I have nothing to do with the ranch. Do you see that canyon yonder, opening on the head of this valley?"

"I suppose I do."

"We call it Secret Gulch. It hides more than one secret—a dark one and a bright one. In the bright one, believing you to be a true and honest man, we propose to make you a sharer. And it is no fool of a secret, I can assure you. We have kept it closely because, if it should become known, it would bring men here like a swarm of bees. It is a secret of gold."

At this word Dan Dillon's eyes glistened, though there was an incredulous look in his face.

"We have taken a great deal of gold from that canyon," continued the old man, "and have got it out easily enough so far. But we don't care much for it—"

"Don't care much for it?" exclaimed Dan, in surprise.

"I am telling you the plain truth, my friend. I am an old man now, and a little is enough for me, and I have more than a little. My partner is in the same case, though not so old, and he cares more for his quiet home here than for money. The work is getting harder now, too, calling for younger arms and younger blood, and we may need your help to keep off intruders or

robbers. Oh, I can assure you, Mr. Dillon, that it is not altogether a one-sided arrangement that we are proposing to you. We offer you a chance to make yourself rich again; but it is because we believe in you, and because we need just such a man as you are. Do you accept the offer?"

"Most cheerfully and most gratefully," answered Dan. "I could never have dreamed of such luck as this."

Zanita's pretty face brightened at once, and she looked as if she could scarcely restrain herself from clapping her hands.

"Then you must promise solemnly," said the Mexican, "that you will guard the secret as we have guarded it, until we all agree to reveal it."

"Self-interest would be strong enough to bind me to that," replied Dan; "but you have my promise, and I will make it in any solemn form that may suit you."

"And your young friend?"

"I will answer for him."

"Then, if you choose, you may walk up to the canyon with us, and see what is to be seen there."

Jose, Senor Castana's Mexican servant, was left at the house, with Bert Edes and Zip to take care of Zanita, and Dan Dillon accompanied the old man and his partner to the canyon.

On entering Secret Gulch he was surprised, and his surprise soon grew to amazement.

He had seen many canyons, but never anything like that.

It was so narrow and so high that only a thin streak of daylight was visible above, and its walls were apparently as smooth as if they had been chiseled and polished.

At the distance of some two hundred yards from the mouth a stream of water issued from some lofty source that the eye could not reach, and fell, as a silver thread surrounded by a film of spray, into a rocky basin at the bottom of the cleft.

This was of course the same stream that flowed through the canyon and rippled down the valley.

At a little distance from the foot of the fall the gold-find began, and to this Dan Dillon's attention was quickly turned.

His practiced eye told him that it was of amazing richness, and that there was a great deal more of it about there than could be seen or easily got at.

"It is everything that you have represented it to be, Mr. Camarado, and a great deal more," said he. "I suppose that you are the discoverer. How did you find it?"

"I may say that I tumbled into it," answered the old man. "It was a mere accident."

"An astonishing accident. This is wonderful. There is a mine here that could be sold or worked, and either way it would bring in a great deal of money."

"You are right. Young people can take an interest in that sort of thing. I have gone beyond it. Money can't buy love, and it is only a lure for the crafty and designing."

The old man spoke as if from the depths of a sad experience.

Dan Dillon lost no time in entering upon his new field of operations.

He explained the situation to Bert Edes, greatly to the young fellow's delight, and bound him to secrecy.

Then they both took off their coats, and rolled up their sleeves, and set at work in earnest to bring out the riches that were yet hidden in Secret Gulch.

Mr. Camarado and Senor Castana admired their eagerness and enthusiasm, but regarded with more or less indifference the treasure which the new-comers were piling up.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOW DAN GOT EVEN.

IT was a part of the understanding with their new friends that Dan Dillon and Bert Edes should act as defenders of Secret Gulch and the peaceful home that adjoined it, to guard both against intruders and marauders.

The dwellers in Senor Castana's adobe house had hitherto experienced but little annoyance from outsiders; but reports of rich finds were bringing many miners and prospectors into that region, and they could not expect to be much longer exempt from intrusion.

But the new-comers had brought no weapons with them, and the ranch was nearly as destitute.

So it was settled, after Dan Dillon and Bert Edes had been a few days at the ranch, that they should go to Castro and procure what was needed in the way of arms and ammunition.

They were given the course that would take them to Castro, and the trail was described to them, and they set out at dawn, mounted on the good horses that had carried them so well from the North.

On their persons was securely fastened a portion of the gold nuggets and dust which they had taken from the canyon, which they were to exchange for money with which to make their purchases.

As it was a long ride, and the route was somewhat intricate, it was not until late in the afternoon that they reached Castro.

They found it a thriving settlement of tents and shanties, somewhat like Crosscut had been in what the Crosscutters called "the early days," not so large as Crosscut then was, but for more lively and bustling.

Crosscut, indeed, had settled down to the comparatively quiet condition of a cattle-shipping town, while Castro was a young and fresh mining-camp, with all the excitement and rough attraction that the name implies.

Dan Dillon and Bert Edes were not noticed on their arrival, as strangers were constantly coming and going, and they quietly went about, exchanging their gold and making their purchase.

They secured good rifles and revolvers for themselves, with a supply of ammunition, and a couple of rifles for the ranch.

Then, as they would not be able to make the return journey before the next day, they engaged quarters, and stored the greater part of their purchases.

At night they proceeded to "take in the town," not for the purpose of "painting it red," but with the object of passing the time and satisfying their curiosity.

They entered the "Empire," the most showy and best patronized saloon in the camp, and found there the usual mixed, noisy and turbulent crowd.

Miners were there in abundance, mingled with storekeepers, speculators, card sharps, professional roughs, bummers, a few ranchmen, several Mexicans, and a slight sprinkling of Indians.

On a raised platform in a corner a band, composed of a harp, a violin and a piccolo, was strumming and scraping and blowing in a ga-as-you-please style, and now and then some wild-eyed roisterer was inspired by tanglefoot to attempt a dance to the melody, but was soon convinced that there was no room for that species of amusement.

In the rear, slightly separated from the rest of the establishment by a thin pretense of calico curtaining, were gambling tables, including the lay-out and implements of faro.

As the hour was early, the faro game was not yet in operation, and but two of the other tables were occupied.

Dan pushed his way through the crowd to the rear section of the saloon, and there he saw something that astonished him.

At the same time he was gratified.

He had discovered there a person with whom he had an account to settle.

Seated alone at one of the tables was a quiet, well-dressed man, with a handsome, bearded, inscrutable countenance, who was idly shuffling a pack of cards.

It was Eugene Thistlewood, the high-toned sport who had come and gone at Crosscut, and Dan recognized him at once.

He looked up, and the recognition was mutual; but it may be doubted whether he was quite as well pleased as Dan was.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Thistlewood," said the latter, as he advanced smilingly. "I had not thought of finding you here."

"Nor had I expected to meet you, Mr. Dillon. But such is life. We come and go. We rise and fall. We part and meet. We win and lose. How long have you been in Castro?"

"I arrived this afternoon, and now I am looking about for a little excitement."

"There is plenty of it here, from slow poison to pistol-bullets. You have only to call for what you want, and you are pretty sure to get it. But perhaps you would like something in that line," pointing at the faro-table.

"There is not enough excitement in that for me. I would prefer a little poker. Can you accommodate me?"

"I will try to, the more readily as I believe I owe you a chance. Do you remember that?"

"Oh, yes. I am not in the habit of forgetting."

"Some people don't remember little things like that; but I do. Will you have some wine, Mr. Dillon, before we begin?"

"No, thank you! When we are through with this little business I will be glad to join you."

As Thistlewood appeared to be so much at home at the "Empire," it was perhaps for the best that Dan refused his polite offer.

A man who can steal a pack of cards from a faro-box, and replace them with a pack arranged to suit himself, might easily drug the drink of his antagonist in a quiet game.

They eyed each other across the table before beginning, as prize-fighters scrutinize the points and condition of their opponents.

Then they arranged the deck, cut for deal, and began the game.

It was fast, but not furious, both playing quickly, and money changing hands rapidly, and almost invariably with the advantage on the side of the ex-King of Crosscut.

His winnings were not heavy at first; but soon the stakes grew larger with every deal, and still Dan's good luck attended him.

Thistlewood was obliged to go twice to the bar to get money to carry on the game, and the second time he brought back a big roll of bills.

"The cards seem to run against you to-night,"

remarked Dan. "Had you not better put off the rest of my chance to some other time?"

Possibly Eugene Thistlewood would have been willing enough to do so, and possibly he would have done so, if the quiet remark had not been accompanied by a quiet smile that had the look of a sneer.

Even his impassive face flushed as he replied, a little hotly:

"You play your own game, sir, and I will play mine. He who wins in the end will have the best right to laugh."

Another deal brought out yet higher stakes, and again the Crosscut champion won.

He was then about five thousand dollars ahead of the game.

This was not a very heavy amount to be won or lost in such a camp as Castro; but it was no small matter, and the chink of gold and the rustle of bills attracted the people in the saloon, until quite a party had collected about the players.

The next deal was the culmination of the game.

It was Dan Dillon who then shuffled and handled the cards.

He had thus far, for reasons best known to himself, but which may have been guessed by his antagonist, adopted the policy of betting lightly on Thistlewood's deals, but heavily on his own.

This deal was no exception to the rule, and he met the rather startling advances of his opponent with plenty of coolness and nerve, meeting every raise on the part of the other with a little higher raise, until there was a big pile on the table.

Finally he consulted his cards, as if doubtful of their value, and counted out on the table the exact amount of Thistlewood's last raise.

"I call you," said he.

When the game was thus brought to a crisis there were just ten thousand dollars in the "pot." Thistlewood showed four queens.

Dan Dillon showed four kings, and scooped in the stakes.

That was all.

It was a very simple matter.

Nothing but a few cards that happened to be a point higher than a few other cards.

But it decided a question of ten thousand dollars between the two men.

They both stood it very well, especially Dan. Eugene Thistlewood's face took on a hard look, and his cheeks turned ashy pale.

But he made no grumble, not even a grimace.

"That is correct," said he. "The money is yours. We are quits now, Mr. Dillon."

"Not quite," observed Dan, when he had finished pocketing the money.

"Not quite? What do you mean by that?"

"We would be quits, if you had won my money fairly when you broke my bank at Crosscut. But you then accomplished the meanest swindle that I ever knew to be worked by any man who claimed to be a gentleman."

"A swindle! Be careful what you say, sir."

The spectators who surrounded the table were becoming interested, and others joined them.

Talk of that nature promised a fight.

"I am careful what I say," replied Dan. "I measure my words, and am responsible for them. It was a most contemptible swindle. I put a pack of cards in my box when I opened the game, and was obliged to go down-stairs, leaving you in the room alone. While I was out you stole my cards from the box, and put a cold deck in their place, thus compelling me to play against myself, while you could call every turn. Perhaps you want to know how I found you out. I examined the cards when you had gone away, and discovered that they were not mine, though almost exactly like them. That night you sneaked out of town."

The spectators were watching Thistlewood, and awaiting his answer to this charge.

"I did nothing of the kind," he quietly said.

As he spoke he made a suspicious movement, which did not escape the keen glance of Dan Dillon.

"You are a liar and a dirty dog," said Dan, in so loud and clear a tone that it was heard over all the racket of the room.

At that instant each drew a revolver.

But neither attempted to fire.

Dan clearly had the drop on his antagonist, but did not wish to kill him, and Thistlewood found himself at the mercy of his accuser.

He was not helpless, however, as he had plenty of backers at hand.

It became evident almost immediately that he was the ruler of the "Empire," and that most of the bystanders were his friends and supporters.

"It is bad enough to be a sneak thief," remarked Dan; "but it is worse to lie about it."

The report of a pistol rung through the room, and a bullet whizzed by Dan's ear.

The shot did not come from Thistlewood's pistol, but was fired by one of his friends who stood at a little distance from him.

As quick as a flash Dan was on his feet, had seized the high-toned sport by the collar, and had jerked him down upon the table.

There he held him firmly, with a cocked revolver at his head.

"Do that again if you dare!" he shouted, as

he stood and glared at the men who were supporting Thistlewood.

"If any sneaking coward tries that game again, it means death to this man here!"

Bert Edes had ranged himself at the side of his friend, with his revolver ready for instant use, and there could be no doubt that he was full of pluck and determination.

But he was only one, and Dan's enemies were many.

He had a partial and temporary advantage in the hold he had secured on Thistlewood; but they had the odds of numbers, and could easily outflank him or surround him.

It was evident, when they began to handle their weapons and sidle around, that they knew how to play their game so as to save Thistlewood and wipe out his assailant.

Dan perceived this quickly enough, and whispered to Bert Edes.

But the lad was clearly unequal to the task of guarding the rear, and the situation was rapidly growing serious for Dan, when there was a sudden change of scene.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BRIGHT SKY CLOUDED.

THE change was caused by the rapid arrival of a tall and powerful man, who pushed through the throng, shoving them to one side and the other, as a steamer might scatter a fleet of fishing-boats.

"It's Dan Dillon!" he shouted, as he forced his way to the gentleman from Crosscut. "I was sure it was his voice. Hi, there, Colima men! It's Dan Dillon, and they want to double-bank him. But they can't play that game when Nat Burnett is on deck."

He emphasized his words with two fine revolvers, which flashed before the eyes of the crowd as he began to speak.

He was also quickly joined by half a dozen able-bodied young men, who had the look and manner of cowboys, and who were equally well armed.

It was evident, too, that he had other friends in the house, who were ready enough to strike in for his side.

Dan Dillon cast a quick glance at the man who had come to his aid, but did not yield an inch of his advantage over the man he held.

"Let him up, Dan," said Burnett. "If there is going to be a fight, we will give everybody a fair show."

Dan released Thistlewood, who shook himself together, and took an account of stock of his friends and his foes.

The former still seemed to be more numerous than the latter; but Dan Dillon's supporters clearly had the advantage of solidity and determination.

The others showed no disposition to press the affair to an extremity, but waited for the word from their leader, and he did not give it.

"You had better drop this, my Christian friends," said the tall man. "My friend here was not hunting a row, I am sure; but he is a man who is mighty apt to have right on his side, whatever he does."

"I have given you the straight truth about this man Thistlewood," observed Dan. "He is a sneak thief and a liar, and he will bear watching. I tell you this for your own good."

"Let me introduce you to my friend," resumed Burnett. "He is Dan Dillon, well known as the King of Crosscut, and I can truly swear that he is no slouch of a man. Do you want to know why I like him? I will give you a sample of his style. He stood up for me against a crowd—they were a crowd of his friends, too, and I was a stranger—who were hot to hang me because they had mistaken me for a horse-thief. He stood up for me alone against the whole pack of them, and made them turn me loose. And what did he do then? Why, he filled my pockets with money, giving me plenty to go South and take a good start, and most of you know what I have done down here. That's the kind of man Dan Dillon is, and whoever says a word against him can't crawl over the Colima range without getting his hide full of holes."

At the conclusion of this speech Dan invited the crowd to saturate themselves at the bar at his expense, including his late antagonist in the invitation.

"I think we are quits now, Mr. Thistlewood," said he, "and I would be happy to have you join me if you can do so."

Thistlewood accepted the invitation ungraciously; but his adherents were willing enough to be on good terms with the stranger.

When the poisoning process was complete, Dan took Nat Burnett aside, and had a confab with him.

"I am glad to see that you are looking and doing so well, old pard," he said. "What have you struck?"

"I've got a sheep range on Colima Creek," answered Burnett, "that covers some of the finest land on the footstool. Come and see me, and divide the business with me, if you ain't well enough fixed to suit yourself."

"There is nothing for me to complain of, Nat; but I will come and see you some time."

Just now I must go and take a snooze, as I have to leave Castro early in the morning."

"Same here. I'll try to strike you in the morning."

When Dan and Bert started from Castro at an early hour, they found a mounted party of Colima men waiting for them, with Nat Burnett at their head.

"I reckon it won't take us much out of our course to see you a few miles on your way," remarked Burnett. "That Thistlewood is a sneak, as you said, and it would be just like him to send a gang after you to clean you out."

This companionship made things pleasant for the travelers while it lasted, and Dan told as much of his story as he cared to tell, receiving a great deal more information than he imparted.

When they separated, Burnett gave his friend directions for finding his ranch, and begged him to run over there and take it in.

"If you ever want any money," he said, "or any muscle, or anything you can call for, just come or send to Colima Creek, and the whole outfit is at your service, from Nat Burnett down to the smartest shepherd dog you ever saw."

As Dan and Bert rode on, the former congratulated himself upon having fallen in with Nat Burnett and his party.

"I would not be a bit surprised, Bert," said he, "if we should yet have to call upon these people for help. I don't know why it is, but I feel it in my bones that we are going to have trouble of some sort before long."

They reached Secret Gulch, however, without any trouble, and were warmly welcomed by the people there, who congratulated them upon their safe return.

"I am sorry to say, though," remarked Dan, "that we don't deserve as much credit as you are disposed to give us. It was luck, rather than good behavior, that brought us safely back. I am worth ten thousand dollars more than when I started; but it was by a scratch."

"How was that?" inquired the old man.

"I collected, after my own way, a debt that was due me, but came near having to fight for it, and with big odds against me."

He told the story of his encounter at Castro with Eugene Thistlewood, but gave a very quiet coloring to his own performance in the affair.

Zanita, who had become aware of the fact that he possessed the quality of modesty in speaking of his own exploits, afterward sought Bert Edes, and obtained from the lad a full account of the difficulty at Castro, which greatly increased her admiration of Dan Dillon.

But the truth was that he had already become a hero in her eyes, and that she worshiped him as such.

Indeed, before Dan's sojourn at Secret Gulch had lengthened into weeks, it was manifest that he had stumbled upon more than one streak of luck there.

As soon as he saw the girl, when she stood near him and watched the fight with the panther, he was fascinated by her face and form and manner.

This feeling grew upon him rapidly, until he knew that a sentiment far deeper and stronger than mere admiration had taken complete possession of him.

He had fancied that he loved Effie Harris, who became Effie Seaver; but he was then satisfied that his affection for her had been mere fancy.

It was so soon over, and so entirely over, when she disgusted him.

He had so quickly awakened to the fact that his nature had nothing in common with hers.

Zanita was a vastly different person, not only as he saw her then, but as she always was.

She was what Effie had seemed to be—innocent and unsuspecting, as fresh and fair as an opening flower in the morning dew.

Dan Dillon soon began to believe that life would be worthless to him unless he could gather her to his heart and call her his own.

He had reason to believe, also, that his desire to do so would meet slight opposition, if any, on her part.

Not a word of love had been spoken by either; but their looks and tones and actions were sufficient to inform each of the feeling of the other.

When this condition of affairs had become what Dan Dillon considered a certainty, he thought it to be his duty as an honorable man to make an explanation to Senor Castana, not only because he was Zanita's father, but because he was his own friend and benefactor.

So he had an interview with that gentleman, before whom he laid the entire case as he understood it.

"If I am wrong in this," said he, "and if you cannot encourage me in the hopes I entertain with regard to your daughter, I must drop everything and go away from here, for I cannot stay near her unless I am freely allowed to love her to my heart's content."

"You may stay if you will," replied the Mexican. "I am not blind, and my Zanita can talk with her eyes as well as with her tongue. I have been aware of the growing feeling you speak of, and would have interfered before now if I had not been willing that it should continue. My old friend and partner gives you a good name, and we are both highly pleased with you."

You have my permission to woo Zanita; but I wish it to be clearly understood between us that if you win her I am not to lose a daughter when I gain a son."

Dan made promises in plenty, and hastened to take advantage of Senor Castana's permission.

Thereafter everything went smoothly and brightly at Secret Gulch.

In the canyon itself business was highly prosperous, and Dan Dillon and Bert Edes, with the assistance of Jose, worked so briskly and intelligently that they promised soon to exhaust the pockets which had yielded so plentifully.

Dan did not fail, however, to enjoy himself abundantly with Zanita, and their quiet walks in the beautiful valley doubtless yielded them a vast amount of comfort.

One evening, after their return from one of those walks, Dan was taken aside by Bert Edes, who approached him in a confidential and mysterious manner.

"Suthin's up, Mr. Dillon," said the lad.

"Up where? What's up?"

"The devil."

"The devil is always about, Bert. What shape does the old rascal take now?"

"You went out walkin' this evenin' with Miss Zanita," answered the lad.

"Yes."

"I was thar and tharabouts."

"You were, hey? Watching us, Bert?"

"I was watchin' somebody who was watchin' you."

"Indeed! Who was that?"

"You couldn't guess it in a month o' Sundays. The devil is about, as I told you. It was her."

"And who is her? I don't see what you are driving at."

"Why, Mrs. Seaver."

Dan was surprised, startled, astonished, almost dumfounded.

He could hardly believe what he had heard, and yet, what could be more likely than that the passionate and vindictive woman should follow him down there, find him with the aid of Blant Suffield, and hang upon his tracks.

"Are you sure, Bert?" he demanded. "Is there no chance of a mistake in that? Haven't your eyes fooled you?"

"Not a bit of it. Don't you think I know that woman? Reckon I oughter! I see'd her as plain as I ken see anythin'. I watched her nigh half an hour while she was watchin' you, and she looked—oh, how she looked! Like a devil. As if she wanted to eat you, or to kill you in your tracks."

"Why didn't you come and tell me about it then?"

"I was afraid it might bother Miss Zanita."

"Perhaps you were right in that, and perhaps you had better not mention the matter to anybody else. Effie Seaver here! That means mischief, sure."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WOMAN DOES HER WORST.

THERE could be no doubt that the presence of Effie Seaver in the neighborhood of Secret Gulch meant mischief, and Dan Dillon meditated upon it seriously.

But what could she do?

What she could or would do could only be judged by what she had done, and of that Dan's experience had been severe enough.

If she was still allied with Blant Suffield and his gang, and that was highly probable, they might make a raid on the ranch, and kill or capture Dan and all his friends.

While Dan had no fear for himself, he trembled for the others, especially for Zanita.

On second thoughts it seemed best to him to inform his friends of the impending danger, and he did so.

Zanita clung to him, and regarded him with looks of apprehension, as if she feared for nothing but his safety.

Senor Castana received the news gloomily, and looked anxiously at his daughter, as if there was no peril but for her.

Mr. Camarado showed unusual fire, blazing with indignation at the audacity and pertinacity of the woman.

"I am very sorry, my friends," said Dan, "that I have brought this trouble upon you. If I had had the faintest idea that anything of the kind would happen, I would never have come near you. But there is no help for it now, unless I go away from here."

"That is not to be thought of," promptly interposed Senor Castana.

"We might make a good fight, if we knew when and where to find our foes, and should all be on hand together; but to watch for them and guard against them would be almost impossible."

"Let them come!" shouted the old man. "They will soon find out how I can fight. I can shoot as straight as any young fellow yet, and my first bullet would find the heart of that woman, if she should dare to come within range."

"I will take Bert out in the morning," said Dan, "and we will look for traces of Blant Suffield's gang. If they are anywhere in this

region, I have friends who will help me clean them out."

In the morning Dan went out with Bert, followed by the cautions and fears of Zanita, to look for possible enemies.

They went to the place where the lad had seen Effie Seaver, and carefully examined the ground, but found no trace of her.

If she had been in the vicinity, she must have stepped very lightly, or have covered her trail very skillfully.

Then they mounted their horses, and rode all over the country, for miles about Secret Gulch, searching all the valleys and ravines and canyons and forests and patches of timber, and closely inspecting the ground for trails or tracks.

But they found nothing of the kind, and returned and reported the utter failure of the expedition.

Senor Castana and Zanita were delighted, and it was the general opinion of all but Bert that there was really nothing to fear.

Though Dan had some doubts that were not yet set at rest, he was strongly inclined to believe that Bert had been the victim of an optical or some other illusion.

The lad stoutly declared that he was certain of what he saw, and that he would believe his own eyes in spite of all the arguments that could be brought against him.

But, when he had taken Jose out on another day, and they had made as thorough a search of the country as they were able to make, and had found nothing that could even excite their suspicion, even he began to be doubtful and to discredit the evidence of his senses.

Nevertheless, Dan was determined to err if at all, on the side of caution, and day after day he kept a sharp look out, sending Bert or Jose to examine the country, or going on scouts of his own.

But none of them found anything, and after a few days they all settled down to the conclusion that they had nothing to apprehend.

Thus affairs at Secret Gulch fell back into their regular routine, and more gold was taken out of the canyon; and Dan and Zanita grew yet fonder of each other, if that were possible, and there was talk of going to Castro to find a priest to unite them in marriage.

Finally it was arranged that he should go to Castro, and he went.

Jose accompanied him, and they carried some nuggets and gold dust, which Dan exchanged for money to his satisfaction.

He had no further difficulty with Eugene Thistlewood.

That individual had fallen into such general disfavor after his encounter with Dan, that he had sold out his possessions and abandoned Castro.

Dan was also successful in the main object of his visit, finding at Castro a Mexican priest, who promised to visit Secret Gulch within a few days for the purpose of marrying the expectant couple.

It was arranged that Jose should be sent to act as his escort to and from the Gulch.

The next morning Dan and his companion, loaded with money, and filled with joyful anticipations, set out to return.

As they started late, and did not hurry their horses, the day was nearly done when they came in sight of Secret Gulch.

Riding slowly up the beautiful valley, they were surprised and startled by the howling of Senor Castana's big hound.

It was not a barking, nor yet a baying, but a mournful, long-drawn howl, that told too plainly of death and disaster.

Jose declared that he had never heard Zip howl in that manner before, and both spurred their horses forward, sure that something terrible had happened.

As they rode up the slope toward the house, the old man who called himself Mr. Camarado came out to meet them.

He was bent and tottering, and his countenance wore a look of extreme agony.

"For God's sake!" exclaimed Dan, as he threw himself from his horse, "tell me what is the matter here!"

"She is gone!" feebly gasped the old man.

"Gone? Is Zanita gone?"

"Yes, and her father is dead."

"Merciful Heaven! who has done this? What has happened?"

The old man was obliged to seat himself before he could begin his explanation.

Then he told the story in broken tones, mingled with sobs and bursts of anger.

It had happened about the middle of the morning of that day.

Bert Edes had gone into the canyon to work, and the old man had followed him thither to give him directions for working a newly-discovered pocket.

They were busy in there at a little distance from the fall, when they heard Zip barking out in the valley.

To this they paid no special attention at first; but soon the barking grew fast and furious, and then they heard several shots.

Convinced that something unusual was transpiring, they hastened out of the canyon.

Bert, who was of course quicker than the old man, got out first, and ran toward the house at the top of his speed.

He was just in time to catch sight of a party of horsemen who were galloping down the valley, and who soon disappeared from his view.

He shouted the news to Mr. Camarado, who came toiling after him as rapidly as possible, and they hastened to the house, where a sad sight met their eyes.

Senor Castana was stretched on the ground in front of the door, a bullet-hole in his breast, and another in his head.

Either wound would have been sufficient to kill him, and his death had doubtless been instantaneous.

An examination of his repeating-rifle showed that he had fired two of the shots that had been heard in the canyon.

One of the other shots had been fired at Zip, whose sleek coat was bloody where a bullet had grazed him.

When he was found he was in a distracted state, making bursts down the valley, and then bounding back to the lifeless body, as if doubtful whether he ought to follow his mistress or remain with his dead master.

For Zanita was absent, and there could be no question as to what had become of her.

Bert had plainly seen her struggling in the grasp of one of the raiders as she was borne away on his saddlebow.

Dan listened to this broken narrative as it was given to him by piecemeal, without uttering a word; but his face was ashy pale, and there was a savage light in his eyes.

She was gone—Zanita was gone—and her father had been slain in her defense.

He felt these terrible facts in their full force, though he could not yet fairly realize them.

The burning, consuming idea of revenge had taken full possession of him, and everything he said and did must bend to that thought and point in that direction.

"Was she there?" he asked, in a harsh and unnatural voice. "That woman—was she with the rest of the scoundrels?"

Yes, Effie Seaver had been there.

It was she who had prompted the raid, and had been the moving spirit of the entire villainy.

Bert Edes had seen two women among the marauders—one free, and the other a captive—and there could be no doubt that one of them was Effie Seaver.

"And I am the cause of this," bitterly exclaimed Dan Dillon. "It is I who have brought all this trouble upon this peaceful family. I have caused the death of our dear friend there and the destruction of his daughter."

"How so?" demanded the old man. "How are you to blame?"

"It is that woman's pursuit of me—her infernal jealousy—that has led to this terrible misfortune. She has traced and followed me down here, has seen me with Zanita, and has determined that the dear girl should perish, rather than that she should belong to me. If it had been anything but that, I could have borne it much better; but that woman is a demon, a fiend."

"She has done the worst she could do now," said the old man.

"The worst and the last. Her career must come to an end after this. There is nothing left now but revenge. What has become of Bert, Mr. Camarado?"

"He has gone to ask help of your friend Burnett. He said that he knew where to find him, and mounted and rode away directly after the disaster was discovered."

"Good boy! I might have known that he would have done that. It was just the right thing to do. I will ride on and meet them, if you will allow me to. I must begin the pursuit as soon as possible."

The old man implored Dan not to desert him, but to stay there and await the arrival of assistance, declaring that he was anxious to take part in the pursuit, and that it would be useless to attempt to do anything before morning.

Dan was persuaded to consent to this, promising that he would at least remain there until proper preparations could be made for their journey, including arrangements for the care of their property.

Jose was set to cook food for them to carry on the way, while Dan Dillon dug a grave in which to place the body of Senor Castana.

After the Mexican had been decently interred, Dan and the old man buried in a secret spot the treasure that had been accumulated on the ranch, with the exception of such amounts of money as they chose to carry on their persons.

Then they prepared their arms and ammunition, and gave their horses the best possible care.

Their preparations were completed before midnight, and Dan was growing restless and anxious to get away, when Zip set up a barking, and several mounted men were descried in the darkness, coming up the valley.

They proved to be friends—Nat Burnett and half a dozen of his cowboys—who were warmly welcomed to Secret Gulch.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE PURSUIT.

Bert Edes jumped off his horse, and grasped the hand of his friend without speaking.

He knew how sorely Dan had suffered.

"We jumped on our horses, old pard," said Nat Burnett, "as soon as the young chap struck us with the bad news, and set off without a minute's delay and here we are, ready for business. It is for you to say what you want us to do, and you may count us in to any length."

"It would be no pleasant picnic for you," responded Dan, "to run down Blant Suffield and his gang."

"Yet I shall be glad and proud of the invitation. Why, Dan, it was that scoundrel Suffield who held me up and stripped me, and gave me a stolen horse to ride in place of my own, and so got me into that serious scrape that you helped me out of. The infernal scamp thought it was a fine joke, I suppose; but I have been searching ever since for a chance to get even with him. Oh, the picnic will suit me, pard, to a dot."

The question arose whether they should start the pursuit immediately, or wait until morning.

Dan Dillon wanted to set out at once; but Burnett argued that it would be useless to attempt to take up the trail in the darkness.

"But here is a hound that can find it and follow it, urged Dan.

"Perhaps he might, and it's likely that he would; but they've got a big start of us, my boy, and we can't hope to catch up with them, anyway, before they reach their den, wherever that may be. There's the old man, too. We must think of him, and he ought to have a bit of rest before he tries such a long pull."

"Never mind me," broke in Mr. Camarado. "I am not as old as I look to be. When I get started on the trail you will see that I can keep up with the best of you, and if it comes to fighting, I can take a hand in that game too."

Dan wanted to leave the old man behind to take care of the ranch, but he was so bent on going, that there was no use in talking about that, and Nat Burnett said that he would leave two of his men in charge there, picking up some more at Colima Creek if it should be thought necessary.

"Then there is something that you need to know," said Dan.

He took his friend aside, and told him the secret of the gold in the canyon.

"Can your men be trusted?" he asked.

"You may trust them just as far as you might trust me," answered Burnett. "I will guarantee them."

"Then I will leave you to explain that matter to them. I don't care a straw about the gold, myself; but the old man might care. I have only one thing to live for now."

"Just so, my boy. I understand you. Her life, or the death of every villain in that gang."

In the gray dawn of the next morning they set out, fortified by a substantial breakfast that Jose had prepared for them with the help of the cowboys.

Zip soon struck the trail, following it so easily with eager yelps, that there was nothing to hinder them from making a rapid pursuit.

Two of Nat Burnett's men had been left at Secret Gulch; but he sent one of the others around by the Colima range to pick up two more, who soon joined them.

He then stripped his place of nearly all its available force; but of that he said nothing to Dan, as he would willingly have taken the last man to serve the purpose in hand.

With this addition the party amounted to eleven men, counting Mr. Camarado, who made good his boast of being able to keep up with the best of them, and who handled his rifle as if he meant to do execution with it.

They went northward at a rapid rate, following the broad and plain trail without difficulty, and at times camping where the band they were pursuing had camped.

So the pursuit was kept up until they found themselves in a tangled network of hills which Dan Dillon speedily recognized.

He had been very quiet during the chase, as different from his ordinary self as a man could be, seldom speaking unless he was spoken to, and riding with bent head and moody brow, apparently possessed only by his consuming thirst for revenge.

But, when he was aroused by his knowledge of the region they had reached, he brightened up at once, with a savage, steely brightness that meant deadly harm to somebody.

"Now we've got them!" he exclaimed. "I know the very place they have headed for. It is a hard den to get at; but, when we have them cornered there, they will not be likely to get out alive."

"Have you been here before, Dan?" demanded Nat Burnett.

"Indeed I have, and so has Bert Edes. I will give you the points."

Dan told his friend the story of his capture and escape, and of Bert Edes's adventures with the Suffield gang.

He also gave a full description of their hiding-place and the means of access to it.

"Are you sure," inquired Burnett, "that

there is no back door by which they can sneak off and leave us in the lurch?"

Dan was sure that there was nothing of the kind, and Bert, who had a more intimate acquaintance with the locality, confirmed his assurance.

"Then we've got 'em," declared Nat. "You are right about it, Dan. They will either have to be shot down, or burned out, or starved out."

"We must not forget their prisoner," remarked Dan. "We can't afford to burn or starve her."

"Of course we can't. We will have to make some sort of a treaty with the scoundrels, I suppose, after we get them penned. If they have a bit of manhood in their bodies, she should be the last to suffer."

"That might be so, if the men had their way. But there is a fiend among them, who is directing their devilry."

"You refer to the woman who has been the cause of all this mischief. What shall we do to her? Shall we shoot her down with the rest if we get the chance?"

"Leave her to me!" cried Mr. Camarado. "I will take that trouble off your hands."

The old man spoke so fiercely and with such vehemence, that all looked at him, as if questioning whether he was in his right mind.

But Dan Dillon, who knew of his affection for Zanita, saw nothing that was wild or strange in his manner.

It was about the middle of the forenoon when they became aware of their probable proximity to the Suffield gang, and a question arose as to whether they should go right on and attack the scoundrels in their stronghold, or wait until night for a chance of surprising them.

Dan Dillon and Mr. Camarado, who were eager for immediate operations, insisted on pressing forward, and their view prevailed.

Bert Edes, who was tolerably familiar with the intricacies of that network of hills, led the way, and the party followed nearly the same route which Dan and Bert had taken when they escaped.

It was possible that they might catch the villains napping, and they hoped to be able to surprise them even by daylight.

But that hope was doomed to disappointment. As their horses climbed to the top of a ridge, they got a view of a man in the valley below.

The man caught sight of them at the same time, and started off at full speed, pursued by the entire party.

He was on foot, and they were mounted; but he ran well, and had only a short distance to go.

Yet, when he darted into the narrow pass that led to the den of the gang, they were close at his heels, and they might have shot him down, if they had not been unwilling to give a premature alarm to the rest of the band.

Nat Burnett and his cowboys wanted to follow him directly into the den, but Dan Dillon begged them to desist, as he knew that such an attempt could lead to nothing but their death.

So they proceeded to lay siege to the stronghold.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SIEGE.

DAN DILLON and his friends settled down to business in earnest as soon as they were sure that the scoundrels they sought were in their hiding-place.

Nat Burnett, who had been a soldier in the civil war, took charge of the military operations, and organized the party into a camp of siege.

It was known that the narrow passage led into a basin, back of which was the hole in the rock which the Suffield gang was supposed to occupy.

That passage, therefore, was impracticable as a way of attack, from the fact that their opponents would be able to shoot them down singly as they should emerge on the inside.

As the basin was surrounded by inaccessible hills and walls of rock, a descent into it was equally impracticable.

Therefore it seemed to be a solid fact that a siege was the only way to exterminate the marauders, or compel their surrender, or otherwise bring them to terms.

Nat Burnett's first proceeding was the establishment of a barricade at the mouth of the pass, and this work was soon well done, as there was plenty of broken rock at hand for building a fortification.

It was not high, but sufficiently so for the protection of the men who were to rest behind it while they waited for the possible appearance of the enemy.

There could be no doubt that a few riflemen behind the barricade could prevent the exit of any number of their foes through the passage.

While this work was going on Dan Dillon and Bert Edes surveyed the surroundings, with a view to an aggressive operation that might be more immediately effective.

It was Dan's idea that if they could gain the heights overlooking the basin they would be able to annoy their enemies to such an extent as would force them to come to terms.

To reach the heights was no easy matter, as they seemed to be quite as inaccessible from the outside as they were known to be from the inside.

But careful investigation enabled the searchers to discover, though at a considerable distance from the point of siege, an incline up which they scrambled with difficulty until their progress was stopped by a bluff of bare rock.

This obstacle they surmounted by the aid of a tree that grew against the bluff.

Then they picked their way over the rugged heights until they reached a position that commanded a full view of the basin below.

They were also able, by passing to the other side of the height which they then occupied, to communicate with their friends in camp below, whom they promptly informed of their success.

But the day was then near its close and it was already so dark down in the basin that nothing there was visible to them from that distance.

Therefore they were obliged to pass the night where they were, but for this they were prepared, having taken from the camp a supply of provisions and water, together with sufficient ammunition for any probable need.

Early in the morning they were both awake and astir.

Up to this time nothing had been seen or heard of Blant Suffield's gang, by those below or those above, since the man who discovered their approach had safely run in.

It could only be supposed that he had given the alarm to his comrades, who were doubtless carefully considering the situation and watching for the first move on the part of their adversaries.

It was to be expected that they would be prompt to take advantage of any mistake that might be made by the attacking party.

Therefore it was necessary to be cautious, in order that no errors should occur.

Dan had desired to be early at his post, believing that at daylight some of the gang would be likely to sally out to get wood or water, to attend to their horses, or to reconnoiter the position of the enemy.

He also hoped—though there was hardly a chance of anything of the kind—that he might catch a glimpse of Zanita.

It was decidedly more probable that he would see Effie Seaver there, than that he would get sight of the captive.

But he had to wait a long time before he could see anything at all.

He was surprised—though he might have known that it would be so if he had considered the matter—to perceive what a length of time was required for daylight to penetrate to the bottom of that well-like basin.

When it was broad day on the heights, it was not even dawn down there.

But he steadily maintained his position at the edge of the rock, behind the trunk of a fallen tree which he had moved there to serve as a cover in case it should be needed, and peered down into the darkness with fierce eyes that were full of hunger for revenge.

Eagerly he watched the daylight as gradually it crept down into the basin, slowly but surely moving from point to point, until the tops of the trees below became visible, and then the grass, the horses, and the mouth of the hole in the rock.

It was from a safe distance that he looked down upon that strange scene, and the bottom of the basin appeared to be smaller than he had supposed it was, owing to the height from which he viewed it.

But the distance was not too great for a bullet to cover, especially as it would be aided by the force of gravity, and it would only be necessary to take careful aim, in case he should see anything to aim at.

"Look out, Bert!" he ordered, as soon as the daylight made the bottom of the basin visible.

Soon his patient watching was rewarded by the sight of somebody who emerged from the hole in the rock.

It was neither Zanita nor Effie Seaver, but a member of the gang whom Bert Edes recognized.

He came out cautiously, and looked about suspiciously, but apparently saw nothing to arouse his apprehensions.

Directly he was joined by another man, who issued from the hole in the rock as the first had done.

Then they crossed the basin together, and disappeared in the pass that led to the outer world.

It appeared that a guard was maintained in that cleft, and that it was then being relieved; for the two men who had gone over there did not return, and two others came out into the basin in their place.

As they crossed toward the hole, the two watchers above pointed their rifles down into the basin.

"Take the hindmost one, Bert," said Dan, "and I will take the other. Ready—fire!"

The two rifles cracked almost together, and Dan's victim fell like a log, with a bullet in his brain.

Bert had missed his man, who bounded away like a scared deer, stumbling over the body of his comrade.

It was well for him that he stumbled, as otherwise he would have been stretched on the ground by Dan's second shot.

He picked himself up and darted into the hole, just in time to be again missed by Bert.

"I am sorry that I missed him," said the lad, as he looked in vain for another chance.

"There is no harm done," replied Dan. "We have proved that we can fetch them from here, and we will have more chances if any of them dare to show themselves. The two fellows who are out we are likely to get, anyway, as they can't go back without exposing themselves."

"They'll wait till night, Mr. Dillon, and we can't touch 'em then."

"That is true. You are brighter than I am this morning, Bert."

It was soon evident that the shots which had been fired from above had caused a commotion in the hole in the rock, if not a consternation.

The gang had doubtless not expected an attack from that quarter, and were surprised to find themselves taken at such a disadvantage.

Apparently they came forward to the entrance, where they cautiously and slightly exposed themselves in their efforts to get a view of their assailants.

Whenever a head was shown it was greeted with a shot from the height, and the bullets struck so close that they soon conquered curiosity down there.

"We've got them shut up now, Bert, like rats in a hole," said Dan, who was grimly exultant over the success he had thus far achieved.

"Yes, sir—I don't see how they can get out."

"They can't stir out of that hole without running the gantlet of our rifles, and they can't even think of returning our fire. They will have to give in before long, as there is not the shadow of a chance for them to sneak out."

"Except at night, Mr. Dillon."

"Confound the night! I am wishing now that there might never be a night."

Dan was soon encouraged by the sound of a voice that reached him from below, inducing him to believe that the rats in the hole might be inclined to come to terms.

The voice was recognized as that of Blant Suffield himself, who, sheltered by a point of rock at the entrance of his den, shouted so that he could be plainly heard on the height.

"Who are you, up there?"

Dan, who had the disadvantage of sending his voice downward, did his best to make himself heard and understood.

"Dan Dillon," he yelled in reply, hoping the sound might reach the ears of Zanita.

"What do you want?" was the yell from below.

"You know what I want. The girl you stole from down yonder."

"Don't you wish you may get her?"

"We mean to have her," fiercely yelled Dan. "Give her up, and you may go clear. If you hurt a hair of her head, we will wipe out every one of you."

An insulting reply was shouted back, and Dan fired a shot, the bullet spattering against the rock close to the speaker's head.

This terminated the negotiation, if such it may be called, and no further attempt of the kind was made.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BANDIT'S BOLD BURST.

LEAVING Bert Edes to watch the basin, Dan Dillon crossed to the other side of the height, from which elevation he informed his friends below of what had happened within his jurisdiction.

They had heard the firing, and were naturally anxious to know what had been going on.

He gave the information as briefly as possible, as it was no easy matter to talk to them from that distance above their heads.

Nat Burnett and the rest agreed with Dan in his opinion that the villains were penned like rats in a hole.

It would only be necessary that the besiegers should keep them from bursting out through the pass, and Dan and Bert would attend to the rest of the business from their perch on the height.

Thus hemmed in, and unable to show their faces outside of the hole except during the intense darkness of night, they must soon be starved into submission unless they had a large supply of provisions in there.

It was true that the starvation process had the disadvantage of including the fair captive with her captors.

But what else could be done?

It would be impossible to rescue her while the scoundrels were able to keep her, and the extermination of the gang, even if she should perish with them, would at least possess the merit of visiting them with condign punishment.

The expectation was, of course, that they would soon come to terms and surrender her.

As the party had been informed of the presence of two men in the pass, they proceeded to make an effort to dislodge them and drive them back into the basin.

But this endeavor came to nothing, after considerable ineffectual firing.

It was discovered that the two men were sheltered by a break in the rock at the inner end of the pass, so that they could not be reached.

To follow them in there would be to expose the assailants to a direct fire from the hole in the rock.

Thus each side could hold the other at bay, and attempts at dislodgement were not to be thought of.

The only impregnable and really advantageous position was that which was occupied by Dan and Bert on the height, as they could have a fair chance at their foes without exposing themselves to any danger worth mentioning.

But they did not succeed in accomplishing anything after the attack by surprise which they made in the morning.

The reason of their inactivity was the indisposition of their enemies to show themselves.

Not a head was poked out of the hole in the rock during the entire day, and no sound from down there reached them.

They were duly informed of the attempt that was to be made on the guard in the pass, and they listened to the firing, waiting eagerly for the two men to be driven out, so that they might shoot them as they ran to the den.

But that chance was denied them, and the remainder of the day was given up to monotonous and tiresome watching.

This vigil was rendered yet more tedious to Dan Dillon by the painful fact of the uncertainty of the fate of Zanita.

It seemed to him that the scoundrels must be sure of their ability to hold out indefinitely, or Blant Suffield would have listened to the liberal proposition for her surrender that was made to him.

Possibly his confidence was caused by his possession of a scheme for escape which his foes could not even guess at.

If there was such a scheme, it must be reserved for the night, and that was the time that Dan Dillon dreaded.

He grew so anxious concerning this point, that he changed his base of operations when the day was near its close, and climbed down into the valley to consult and act with his friends there.

He left Bert Edes on the height to keep watch, though there could scarcely be a doubt that the position would be of no value after darkness should settle down into the basin.

A general council of war was held when he reached the party below, and a plan of action was agreed upon.

It was to be supposed that after dark the guards in the pass would be withdrawn to the den, and it was probable that they would not be replaced.

The two men seemed to be of no use there, and the inner end of the pass was commanded by the rifles of those in the hole in the rock.

No chance of escape for the Suffield gang could be guessed at by their enemies, except that of bursting through the pass.

Darkness would aid them in this, as it might prevent their discovery until they were actually in the midst of their foes.

But it would also aid the assailants, who might push through the pass, if the guards should be withdrawn, without giving any alarm.

According to Dan's idea, they would then be able to distribute themselves about the basin, taking cover behind trees, and occupying positions at each side of the den, and thus force the villains into such close quarters as might compel them to surrender.

Assuming that the plan of escape would be such as they had guessed at, they determined to anticipate it by their attack.

But they failed to fully consider the important fact that it would be night in the basin while it was still day in the valley outside.

That circumstance, as it afterward appeared, was not overlooked by Suffield and his men, who appreciated it, and prepared to take advantage of it to the fullest extent.

Instead of awaiting an assault they were prompt to begin the attack.

When the two guards had been withdrawn, the entire party, under cover of the dense darkness that prevailed in the basin, came out of their den, and stationed themselves near the inner end of the pass, where they could effectually repulse an attempt of the besiegers to enter.

This move, however, was merely preliminary to bringing out the full strength of their game.

They intended to play all their trump cards at once by forcing their way through the pass in the hope of surprising the besiegers.

The only point that worried them was the question of their horses.

At the best the pass was difficult for the animals, and their progress would be slow, and their tramping would cause an alarm.

Moreover, the first one that should be shot down would block the passage for the rest, so that it would be impossible for them to get out.

It was, therefore, absolutely necessary that they should leave their horses in the basin.

Thus their only hope lay in surprising and fully defeating the besiegers, or in breaking through them and seizing their horses.

This was their plan, and it might have succeeded to their satisfaction if their foes had not happened to be wide awake at the time, busily engaged in organizing their own attack.

Blant Suffield, who was quite as brave as he was wicked, formed his men in a line, and did not hesitate to take the lead.

Their rifles were strapped upon their backs, and they depended upon their revolvers, of which each man carried two, ready for instant use.

Cautiously, slowly, and in single file, they crept through the pass, feeling their way in the dense darkness, expecting every moment to stumble upon an enemy who would give the alarm.

But they found no person in there, and were encouraged to hope that they would have better luck than they could have expected.

It was then twilight in the valley, and Nat Burnett and Dan Dillon were forming their men for an attack.

As Suffield reached the end of the pass, the dim light enabled him to see them gathered there, and at the same time he caught sight of their horses among the trees beyond.

The time and the circumstances were favorable for a rush.

The two points to be gained were to scatter the enemy, and then make a break for the horses.

Rapidly the word he whispered to the man behind him was passed down the line, and he burst forth from the pass like a grizzly from its den.

The besiegers were surprised; but there was also a surprise for Suffield and his men.

They had not calculated on the barricade that had been erected out there in front of the pass.

Indeed, they did not discover it until they were right upon it.

As the leader of the gang rushed out, a revolver in each hand, and his eager followers crowded after him, they began a rapid firing at close range which promised to clear the way for them at once.

But their foes rallied behind the cover of the fortification, and speedily returned the fire with the rifles and revolvers which they had ready for their assault.

While the pile of rocks temporarily barred the advance of the gang, the firing became rapid and deadly.

But Blant Suffield was not to be stopped by the fortification or the men behind it.

Over the rocks and through the men he went like a human tornado, firing right and left, and dashing aside every obstacle.

"Every man for himself," was the order he had given at starting, and his comrades did their best to follow his example and save themselves by bursting through their enemies and reaching the horses.

But Suffield was the only man who got through safely.

He ran to the trees at the top of his speed, snatched from a swinging limb the bridle of a horse that was tethered there, leaped on the animal's back, and went thundering down the valley at a breakneck gait.

The growing darkness made him a difficult object to aim at, and his foes were still hotly engaged with the rest of the gang.

To the shots that were fired after him he replied by a taunting yell, and was soon out of view.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHERE IS ZANITA?

THE remainder of the struggle at and about the rock barricade was bloody but brief.

Blant Suffield's men, outnumbered, and confronted by unexpected obstacles, fought with the courage and tenacity of despair, having good reason to believe that no quarter would be given them in the event of their defeat.

Encouraged by the success of their leader, they made strenuous efforts to follow and join him; but every attempt was met and foiled by their determined opponents.

Nat Burnett's cowboys were fully a match for them in courage and skill, and Dan Dillon fought as if he had to do duty for half a dozen men.

As there were but six of them after the escape of their leader, they were soon shot or beaten down, and two of them were taken alive.

Before the close of this combat Dan had lighted a torch at the camp-fire, and was pushing his way through the pass in search of Zanita.

It was certain that she had not been brought out by Blant Suffield or any of his men.

Indeed, it was quite unlikely that they would incumber themselves with a woman in their daring and dangerous attempt to escape.

She must, therefore, have been left behind in the den.

It was a puzzle to guess why Suffield had not gained the freedom of himself and his band by giving her up to her friends.

But Zanita would be able to explain that mystery when she was found.

Unless she was dead!

It was the fear that she might have been murdered as the easiest way of getting rid of her that hurried Dan through the pass and into the basin beyond.

What had become, too, of Effie Seaver?

She was known to have been present at the

abduction of Zanita, and it was supposed that she had remained with the gang.

It sent a chill through Dan Dillon's blood when he thought that his darling might be in the power of that evil and vindictive woman.

He ran across the basin, knowing exactly where to go and what to do, and stumbled over the body of the man he had shot in the morning.

Picking himself up, with a shudder at the evil omen, he hastened to the mouth of the hole in the rock.

All was dark and silent in there, and his torch was burning badly.

By waving it in the air he caused it to give a better light, and then he pushed forward into the den, calling Zanita as he went.

There was no answer.

Not the faintest breath of sound came to him out of that dark and silent den.

He hastily explored the outer apartment, waving his torch to make it burn better, and thrusting it into all the corners and recesses.

No Zanita was there.

But he had not expected to find her there, and had only aimed at making a thorough search as he went.

Of course they had kept her in the inner and smaller apartment, where he had been confined, and there he must look for her.

He pushed through the passage, and again he called as he went.

Still there was no answer.

The inner apartment was as empty as he had found the outer one.

He searched them both with extreme thoroughness, peering into every nook and hole and crevice, at every moment fearing to find the lifeless form of his lost darling.

But he found nothing.

There was plenty to show that the place had been used by men; but in neither of the apartments that composed the den did he find the slightest trace of a woman's occupancy.

Zanita was not there, and probably had not been there, and what had become of her?

That was a question which left even conjecture at a loss.

Effie Seaver was also missing from the gang and the den, and might not her absence be naturally connected with that of the missing girl?

If so, it gave the case a worse look for Zanita, as it must be supposed that Josiah Seaver's passionate and jealous widow was merciless.

Just then it seemed to Dan that his next search must be for Effie Seaver, and that he must hold her to a strict account for the life of Zanita, whether the means he might use should be legal or illegal.

Sadly he left the den and picked his way across the basin and through the pass.

He found his friends gathered about the camp-fire at the rear of the fortification, attending to the wounded and taking account of stock generally.

The victory had not been without cost to them.

Two of the cowboys had been killed, and several of the party had been more or less severely wounded.

Of Suffield's men all were then thoroughly dead but two, and one of those was slightly wounded.

"What have you been doing, Dan?" inquired Nat Burnett, as the ex-King of Crosscut came forward.

"I have been searching the den in there for Zanita Castana, but have not found her or any trace of her."

"Of course you haven't. You might have learned that much, pard, without taking so much trouble. Here are two galoots that we caught alive. I have asked them where the young lady is, and they say that they don't know. Perhaps they can tell more. Ask them yourself."

"No, Nat; I will do it differently. I must get the exact truth. Come here a moment."

Dan took his friend aside, and they had a brief conversation in a low tone.

Then the party separated into two squads, each of which led away one of the prisoners, taking them in different directions.

Each squad carried torches, and in each an ominous-looking rope was a prominent feature.

They did not go far from the camp-fire—just far enough to be out of sight and hearing of each other, and Dan Dillon's squad halted under a tree which he pointed out to them.

It was evident that the tree had been selected because its spreading branches afforded good opportunities for hanging purposes.

The object of this proceeding was painfully apparent to the prisoner, who stood under a stout limb with his hands tied behind his back, and watched with interest the knotting of the rope into a noose.

He had doubtless expected no less merciful doom, and he looked on stolidly, without uttering a word by way of protest or entreaty.

The noose was placed around his neck, and the other end, after being thrown over the limb, was held by some of the squad.

Dan placed himself in front of the man, and spoke to him solemnly.

"You are not to say a word," said he, "until I am through speaking. We want to know what has become of the young lady whom you carried off from down yonder, and we mean to have the exact truth. Your partner over yonder is in precisely the same fix that you are in, and will be asked precisely the same question. If you two give different answers to that question, we will know that one of you has lied, if not both. If your answers agree, we shall conclude that you have told the truth, and you shall live. The question is, what has become of that young lady?"

The prisoner looked his questioner straight in the face, and spoke with no tremor or hesitation.

"I'll give it to you as straight as a line, boss, no matter what my pardner may say, though I reckon that he'll tell the squar' truth as far as he knows it. Thar ain't no reason in the world why we shouldn't, as the gal ain't nothin' to either of us, and that job of Blant's has only brought us into a killin' scrape."

"Less words!" angrily ordered Dan. "Give me a straight answer to my question, and give it at once."

"She got away from us, boss, and that's the solid fact."

"Got away from you? Impossible!"

"That's jest w'ot she did, though. 'Twas at the last camp afore we got here. We was all powerful tired, and slept sound that night. All but her. Seems like she didn't do much sleepin'. Anyhow, when we roused out in the mornin' she was gone."

"Was there no trace of her?" asked Dan.

"She didn't leave no trail that we could make out. Some of us reckoned that Blant thought that t'other woman had suthin' to do with the gal's slopin', 'cause they had a right sharp spat between themselves that mornin'. He turned us all out, and we scampered all over the kentry about thar, but never found no mortal sign of her. But we didn't have much time to spare, as we'd left a plain trail, and so we hurried on."

"What became of the other woman?"

"She left us afore noon of that day, and I reckon she went to Crosscut, as she headed that way. She had a scalawag boy with her as a sort o' guide."

Dan walked away until he met Nat Burnett who was coming toward him.

They compared notes, and it appeared that the stories of the two prisoners agreed substantially.

Then the ropes were removed from the necks of the reprieved men, and both squads returned to camp.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ZANITA'S ABDUCTION.

IT was by patient waiting and watching that Effie Seaver secured the prize she sought in the Grand River country, and thus reached the height of her revenge.

Her rage was terrible when Dan Dillon escaped from her clutches, and she blamed Blant Suffield for not having effectually and finally put Bert Edes out of the way, as if the life of the lad was a matter of not the least account.

She ordered him to set out at once in pursuit of the fugitives, to run them down and recapture them.

But he was in no hurry to obey her orders just then.

He had the wishes of his band to consult, as well as his own, and they saw no advantage to them in that sort of thing.

Perhaps the divorced husband had lost the fancy that had lately possessed him for his ex-wife, and there could be no doubt that he wanted money.

In the matter of money he got what he wanted.

She had a good supply of cash and personal property that could easily be turned into cash, which she had seized from among the effects of her last husband, and of which nobody had yet been able to deprive her.

So she was easily able to satisfy Blant Suffield's demands, being willing to make any sacrifice whatever for the purpose of securing Dan Dillon or wreaking her revenge upon him.

If she could not have him, she meant to do her best to hurt him.

These negotiations had consumed considerable time, as Effie, greatly to her displeasure, was obliged to go to Crosscut to procure funds.

From that town she brought Skinny Mike, who had lately become necessary to her schemes.

The delay had not tended to increase her affection for Blant Suffield; but she was obliged to comply with his exactions, in order to use him for her purpose.

When the party finally started southward, the trail of the fugitives had become difficult, if not impossible, to pick up.

The first dash that was made in the hope of overtaking them, directly after their escape, though it met with no success, had been sufficient to give a general idea of the direction they had taken, and Effie had already known that Dan Dillon meant to go southward.

Therefore the pursuers went southward, trusting largely to luck, as well as to their own judgment.

Here and there they found tidings of the men they were seeking, particularly at the ranch where Dan and Bert had stopped for provisions, and learned enough to tell them that they were traveling in the right direction.

But when they got down into the Grand River country they lost the trail, and had no means in that unsettled region of picking it up.

Then they diverged from the course they had been pursuing, and sought the nearest mining-camp, which proved to be Castro.

Emissaries who were sent into that settlement got on the track of Dan Dillon, whose encounter with Eugene Thistlewood had caused him to be much talked of in Castro.

The news they brought enabled Suffield to get a fair idea of the locality in which his game was to be found, and he finally tracked Dan to Secret Gulch.

They secreted themselves at a considerable distance from Senor Castana's ranch, and Effie, who had ideas of her own concerning the work she wished to be done, scouted around with her henchman, Skinny Mike, to make discoveries and lay plans.

It was on the second of these scouts that the vindictive woman, concealed in the bushes at the side of the valley, caught sight of Dan and Zanita as they came strolling along there in the dusk of the evening, their arms linked lovingly together.

As she watched them and listened to them, their actions and tones, though she could not hear what they said, told her the story of their love.

It was told so plainly, that she might have killed them then and there, if she had been properly armed for the purpose, and could have made sure work of the business.

Then it was that a new passion filled and fired her heart—the burning, consuming passion of jealousy.

She saw at last—though she had steadily fought against that belief—that Dan Dillon was lost to her, and the thought that another had taken possession of him drove her frantic.

She hastened back to the hiding-place of the gang, and peremptorily ordered Suffield, no matter at what cost, and regardless of consequences, to capture that girl and carry her away.

Blant was willing enough to do that, but wanted to do a little more.

"What's the use of having any foolishness about it?" he asked. "Why not kill the man, and be done with him?"

"Kill him?" she scornfully exclaimed. "You are a fool, Blant Suffield. What would killing him be worth to me? What would he care for anything when he was dead? I don't want to kill him, but to *hurt* him, and all you have to do is to obey my orders implicitly."

Before anything could be done in that direction, it was discovered that the people at the ranch had taken the alarm, and it was thought best that the gang should decamp and leave the locality clear of their traces.

Suffield wished to make a sure thing of his job, without losing the lives of any of his men.

After time had been given for search to be made, and for suspicion to quiet down, he took up the scouting, excluding Effie from any further share in that part of the business.

He discovered that no danger was then apprehended by the inmates of the ranch, and noted their comings and goings until he was pretty well acquainted with the details of their daily life.

He happened to be in view of Dan Dillon when he started on his journey to Castro, and seized that opportunity for the contemplated raid.

Hastening back to his men, he ordered them to saddle up immediately, and the party started for Secret Gulch, Effie Seaver among the foremost.

On reaching the valley they discovered Zanita at a little distance from the house and near the brook.

A portion of the party made a detour for the purpose of intercepting her, while the others advanced directly toward her.

As soon as she perceived them she ran toward the house, only to discover that her retreat was cut off by the horsemen who had crossed the brook beyond her.

By this time Zip had discovered the intruders, and he ran to the aid of his mistress, giving tongue as he left the house.

Senor Castana also came out, armed with a rifle, prepared to fight to the death for his child.

But this feeble opposition was soon quelled.

Two bullets stretched the Mexican lifeless upon the ground, and one sent the hound howling back to the house.

Zanita fell in a swoon when her father was shot down before her eyes, and Blant Suffield swooped down upon her.

Without dismounting, the giant reached down from his saddle, easily lifted her up before him, and bore her away.

His followers would fain have stopped to sack the house; but Effie Seaver insisted upon a strict compliance with their agreement, and the sight of a man coming out of the canyon hurried them off.

CHAPTER XXXII.

LOST ON THE PLAIN.

NEITHER Blant Suffield nor the woman who directed his wicked work had the least fear of pursuit when they levanted from Secret Gulch; yet they deemed it wise to leave a long trail behind them.

The big bandit knew that there were only two living inmates of the Castana ranch besides Dan Dillon, and that one of those was an old man who could not be regarded as formidable.

But Dan was a person who was not to be lightly considered as an enemy, and both Blant and the woman had good reason to believe that he would not only pursue them hotly, but would hunt them with a fierce and unrelenting purpose of vengeance.

He was then in Castro, however, and it would be some time before he could get on their trail.

There was no hurry, therefore, and they had not gone far from Secret Gulch when they stopped to eat their dinner and prepare for their northward journey.

Zanita had awakened from her swoon as she rode in the arms of her stalwart captor.

She was slow to realize her situation, but was quickly made to recognize the fact that struggles and entreaties would avail her nothing.

Torn from her home and her lover, with the image of her murdered father before her eyes, and borne away to a fate which she could not guess at, she was helpless among her abductors, and was actually stupefied by the terrors of her position.

As Blant Suffield held her closely before him, and looked down upon her tearful but lovely face, a feeling took possession of him that was destined to bear unexpected fruit.

When the party made their first stop and she was lowered to the ground she was still helpless and stupefied.

She could not be tempted to eat or drink, but crouched where she was placed, staring aimlessly about, and vainly endeavoring to collect her scattered senses.

There was a woman in the party with her captors, and it might be supposed that the poor girl could look to her for sympathy and assistance.

But Zanita knew that woman from Dan Dillon's account of her, and knew that of all persons in the world she was to be feared and abhorred.

Even if she had not been aware of Effie's character, the cruel and malevolent glances that her foe now and then cast upon her would have been enough to convince her that no sympathy need be sought in that quarter.

One of the horses that were grazing near the ranch had been caught and brought away as the party left the valley, and Suffield put a man's saddle on its back, so arranged that Zanita could ride upon it.

So she was mounted when they started northward, and the journey was thus made easier for her.

It seemed to her at first that this arrangement might also give her an opportunity to escape, but she soon dismissed that thought from her mind.

She was usually so surrounded by her captors that there was no chance for her to break away, and it was not to be expected that an attempt to escape would in any way improve her prospects.

The necessity of guarding her tended to bring forward the development that has been already alluded to.

Blant Suffield deemed or pretended to deem it his duty to take her under his especial charge, so that he might be sure that she was well watched and safely kept.

Therefore he rode at her side almost constantly, and whenever the party halted he used all manner of pretexts for keeping close to her.

Nothing could be plainer than the fact that the vulture had suddenly become fond of the dove—that the grizzly bear was enamored of the gazelle.

This was not by any means the sort of thing that Effie Seaver had looked for, and the unexpected development became hourly more obnoxious to her.

Doubtless she no longer had any affection for her ex-husband, however she may have regarded him when she married him.

But to see that he had fallen in love with another and a younger woman stung her to the quick.

It did not start the flame of love, but kindled the fire of jealousy, and increased her hatred of Zanita.

That poor girl did not at first understand the demonstrations of the giant, but soon began to comprehend them, and then was horrified by them.

By that time, however, she had regained her senses sufficiently to have pretty definite ideas of what was going on about her, and to measure the effect of her own actions as well as those of others.

She perceived that it would be wise to refrain from making an enemy of the chief of her captors as long as she reasonably could, even though his present attitude was as odious to her as anything could be.

So she pretended not to notice his attentions, and was as silent and stolid as if she comprehended nothing that was said or done.

Zanita's attitude only served to enrage her female foe, who thought that the girl was talking Suffield's demonstrations much too coolly, if she were not really accepting them with favor.

But Effie's black looks went for nothing with the big bandit, and even the captive was unscathed by them.

So matters went on with no change, except that Blant Suffield's infatuation and fervor increased, until they made the last nightly camp which they proposed to make.

Effie Seaver had thus far said nothing to Suffield concerning his strong and evident interest in the Mexican girl, nor did she intend to mention the matter to him.

There could be no doubt that he understood her views well enough without any talk.

For his part, though he did not say as much to Effie, he had an idea that he was going to benefit her and himself.

By taking possession of the Mexican girl, he would not only keep her away from Dan Dillon, but would secure her from himself.

For her part, she had matured a plan which would at once satisfy her vengeance as regarded Dan, and her jealousy as regarded Suffield.

She would keep the girl away from both of them.

To this end it was not necessary that she should employ any violence against the captive, but should merely persuade her to be the instrument of her own destruction.

This plan was carried into effect at the camp which has been mentioned, and the statement made by the two men captured by Dan's party was correct as far as their knowledge of the facts extended.

Effie Seaver was accustomed to sleeping near Zanita, the two women being placed together as a matter of course.

Hitherto she had paid no attention to the prisoner, who was nightly bound in order to prevent the possibility of an escape.

She drew nearer to Zanita when the men were asleep, and whispered to her.

"Child, do you know what that big man means to do with you?"

Zanita knew too well, and she answered with a shudder and a sob.

"It is a terrible fate that he intends for you, girl. There could be nothing worse on earth. I have been feeling pity for you, and have determined to help you, no matter what may be the cost to me."

These were the first sympathetic words Zanita had heard, and they made her heart bound. But, was it possible that the woman really meant to help her?

"It was I who caused you to be taken from your home and brought here," continued Effie. "I did it because I hated Dan Dillon, and wanted to be revenged upon him. But I meant no harm to you, and never thought that you might fall into the hands of that terrible man. There is only one way to escape his clutches. You must run off before he reaches his den."

"How can I?" moaned Zanita. "I am tied."

"I will untie you, and will tell you what to do."

Effie Seaver cast loose the captive's bonds, and pointed southward.

"You can easily slip away from here, now that the men are sound asleep," said she. "Then you must run in that direction, just as I point. Keep your eye on the big star you see yonder."

"I am afraid that I will perish on the plain," objected Zanita.

"Even that would be better than to remain in the power of that monster. But you need have no fear. Your friends have of course followed us as soon as possible, and the trail is a plain one. They cannot be far behind us, and you will soon meet them."

"May I take my horse?"

"That would be out of the question. It would at once awaken the men, and your last hope would be gone. Your only chance is to slip away silently. The darkness is your best friend."

Zanita was grateful even for this, and would have embraced the woman for her kindness; but even Effie Seaver was not base enough to press a Judas kiss upon those fair lips.

The girl arose, stepped lightly beyond the limit of the camp, and disappeared in the darkness, making no more noise than a night bird in the air.

Effie Seaver watched her until she vanished from view, and then laid down to rest, entirely satisfied with herself.

Before morning the Mexican girl would be far from the camp, and Blant Suffield, fearful of pursuit, could not spare much time to search for her.

She must surely lose her way and perish, and that would be an end of her.

Effie, with nothing more to worry her, slept the sleep of the just until dawn.

Blant Suffield, solicitous about his prize, was astir at an early hour, and quickly discovered the absence of Zanita.

He aroused Effie, and angrily demanded what had become of the girl.

The woman pretended to be as much surprised as he was, if not equally indignant, and declared that she had slept so soundly that she knew of nothing that had happened during the night.

Suffield directed two of his men to prepare the morning meal, and with the others he searched the country in all directions for the missing captive.

Not a trace of her was found, and he returned to the camp in despair, ate a hasty breakfast, and started the party forward.

On the route he was in a terrible passion, and freely vented his rage upon Effie Seaver, whom he openly charged with having caused the disappearance of the girl.

She gave no heed to his vamping, of which she had previously had abundant specimens, and refused to utter a word in answer to his complaints.

When they reached the road that led to Crosscut, she turned aside with Skinny Mike, and bade Suffield a polite adieu.

"As we have quarreled," said she, "we had better separate, at least until we need each other again. When I can be of any service to you, you will let me know. When you can help me, you will hear from me. Till then, ta-ta, dear Blant!"

"I thought I was tough enough," muttered the bandit; "but that woman is rock crystal."

Zanita had started southward with the intention of keeping her eye upon the star that Effie Seaver had pointed out to her.

But she was so dazed and bewildered, so full of conflicting hopes and fears, that she soon lost sight of the star, and lost her way.

As she did not know that she had lost it, the fact was not painful to her.

She had been told to run, and she ran as fast as she could—ran until lack of breath compelled her to stop and rest.

The night was very dark, and she saw nothing about her but blackness that confused and oppressed her.

She listened intently, fearing to hear the footsteps of men or horses in pursuit of her; but the silence was so intense that she heard nothing but the beating of her own frightened heart.

Again she fixed her gaze on a big star, which happened to be a different planet from that which had been pointed out to her, and pressed toward it at her best rate of speed.

After an hour's travel she found herself among the hills.

Then the darkness was even deeper than before, and her bewilderment was vastly increased.

Again and again she stumbled and fell, and again and again she rose and pushed forward.

She then knew that she had lost her way, as it was certain that her captors had not lately passed through such a network of hill and ravines as then entangled her.

She had got off the trail, and did not know how to regain it.

Then she burst into tears, and terror and despair took complete possession of her.

When she regained control of her mind it seemed to her that there was nothing for her to do but to remain where she was until daylight should enable her to make her way back to the plain.

She would crawl under the nearest clump of bushes she could find, and perhaps sleep might favor her there.

She advanced cautiously, but drew back in affright when she perceived that she was at the edge of a gully of unknown depth.

The next moment she heard a low but heavy growl, and saw a dark form approaching her.

All hope abandoned her then, and she sunk upon the ground, insensible.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BABY BART ATTENDS TO BUSINESS.

It will be remembered that at the period which witnessed the downfall of the King of Crosscut Bart Scammell had been seized by one of his periodical "turns," which compelled him to devote his entire energies to the consumption of whisky.

During this spell, which was not worse than his ordinary attacks, his mind loosed its hold upon everything in the world but two points of interest.

The first and most absorbing was whisky. Of secondary importance, but still not to be lost sight of, was Effie Seaver.

To prove to her that he had not lost sight of her, he called on her at the Longhorn Hotel.

But he presented such a disheveled and disreputable appearance, his garments torn and slovenly, his face red and bloated, and his only expression that of such complete stupidity, that the reigning Queen of Crosscut treated him with utter contempt, driving him from her presence, and even sending for a porter to eject him from the hotel.

That visit was the only occurrence during his entire spree that stuck to his memory.

When he was beginning to sober up he met

George Innes, who was then in charge of the telegraph office at Crosscut.

While they were moistening their clay together, Baby Bart complained to his young friend of the roughness of his recent reception by Effie Seaver, who had theretofore treated him with such special consideration.

"I suppose she had got all out of you that she cared to get," said George, "and was glad of the chance to get rid of you in that way. I don't see why you wanted to bother with a married woman, anyhow."

"A married woman?" exclaimed Bart. "She is not a married woman now."

"I reckon she is."

"Her husband is dead."

"Old man Seaver may be dead; but it is doubtful whether he legally belonged to her. She had a living husband when she married him."

"Who was he, and where did he belong?"

"Blant Suffield and you know where he belongs."

George Innes proved the truth of his statement by reciting Suffield's declaration on the station platform.

Bart was astounded by this disclosure, but determined to use it for his own purposes.

Dan Dillon had then left Crosscut, and Effie Seaver had also disappeared.

But the woman soon returned for the brief stay that was required to enable her to settle her business with Suffield, and Bart forced himself into her presence when he was "clothed and in his right mind."

He visited her with the express object of acquainting her with the fact that he knew that Blant Suffield was her husband, and he did so, without giving the name of his informant.

She admitted it coolly and naturally enough, merely saying that she had been willing to make a secret of the fact because of Blant Suffield's notorious career.

She had married him when she was very young and ignorant of the world, and he had taken to such wild and disreputable courses that she easily procured a divorce from him.

It was her misfortune that he had been her husband, and she was not at all anxious to publish the fact to the world.

At this interview Effie Seaver showed a strong desire to conciliate Baby Bart; but he had lost all interest in her except as concerned the satisfaction of his grudge.

"I wonder how many husbands she has had," muttered Bart, as he left the hotel.

He spoke of the matter again to George Innes, who had become his special associate and comrade, and they talked it over together.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," observed Bart, "if that man Thistlewood, the high-headed galoot who got away with ten thousand dollars of poor Dan Dillon's money, could tell us a thing or two about her if he would. I happen to know that he went to see her as soon as he struck the town, and that they herded together like old friends while he was here."

"Of course he could tell something," said George.

"I only wish he would strike this town again. If he should turn up here about now, he would be my vegetable. If I didn't squeeze the truth out of him, you might copper me all the rest of my life."

As luck would have it, Eugene Thistlewood did turn up in Crosscut, shortly after Baby Bart had wished to see him.

When Bart had awakened from his whisky nightmare, and had also got rid of the baleful influence of Effie Seaver, his affection for his old friend and partner, Dan Dillon, returned with greater force than ever.

He looked carefully into recent events, and speedily convinced himself that Dan had not only been the victim of hard luck, but had been shamefully ill-treated.

He also fixed upon Effie Seaver as having been largely, if not entirely, responsible for the downfall of his friend.

When he wished to recover from the effects of his dissipation he found no comfortable home ready for him, no bank-account to draw on, and no faithful comrade to depend upon.

The material benefits which he had recently enjoyed had all vanished, and his friend had been dethroned and driven from Crosscut.

Thereafter Baby Bart's ambition had two absorbing objects.

One was to "get even" with Effie Seaver.

The other was to reinstate the ex-King of Crosscut in all his powers and dignities.

It was his desire and firm intention to square Dan with the world, to pay his debts, to buy back his saloon or build him a better one, to accumulate a handsome "stake" for him, to punish all his enemies, and finally to bring him back in triumph to resume his reign over the kingdom of Crosscut.

This was a pretty big contract, and there was but one reliance for Bart in carrying it out—his luck and skill as a gambler.

But he was easily the chief of all in his favorite profession when he chose to put his mind in it, and at this time it entirely absorbed all his faculties.

He played in wonderful luck, too.

Just then Crosscut experienced an influx of men with "boodles"—cattle-buyers and speculators from the East—men who, flush of money and eager for excitement, fell an easy prey to the wild Western card sharp, whose uncouthness and supposed ignorance caused them at first to despise his prowess, and then afterward to attribute his success to mere "nigger luck."

Baby Bart, to use a favorite phrase of his, went for those tenderfeet for all they were worth, and showed them no mercy except such as might be needed for giving him a better grasp of their pocketbooks.

They dropped a large amount of money in Crosscut, and it is safe to say that Bart Scammell got the greater part of it.

His gains were known only to himself; but indications of their size cropped out in more ways than one.

He bought a saloon, in which he fitted up rooms for the practice of his profession.

It was not as fine a "shebang" as the former establishment, as he regarded it merely as a step toward the goal of his ambition; but it did a wonderfully flourishing business, and Bart watched his employees like a hawk, bent on securing every dollar of his profits.

He never touched a drop of liquor these days, and hunted for dollars day and night, only snatching a bit of sleep after daylight in the morning.

Thus he grew thin and pale, while his "boodle" waxed big and heavy.

It was into Bart's new place that Eugene Thistlewood was brought when he struck the town the second time.

The high-toned sport, having sold out his belongings in Castro, had emigrated northward with a pocketful of money, but was willing to increase his pile at the expense of any person less skillful or lucky than himself.

George Innes met him on his arrival, and immediately steered him into the parlor of that watchful spider, Bart Scammell.

Thistlewood had heard of Baby Bart from Effie Seaver, but had never met him; and when he was introduced to "Mr. Scammell," he did not recognize him as the former and formidable partner of Dan Dillon.

Bart was seated behind his faro lay-out, and the high-toned sport at once jumped into the web, proposing, after his favorite fashion, to fight the tiger single-handed, and to break the bank.

Mr. Scammell was willing enough to deal for him, and assured him that the capital of the bank would endure his utmost efforts.

Thistlewood had no opportunity on this occasion to steal a pack of cards from the dealer's box.

He had an antagonist who knew tricks that were worth several of that.

In playing a "square" game the high-toned sport was the possessor of a "system" of his own invention—that attractive and insidious siren which has made victims of so many faro-players.

He sprung it on Bart Scammell, and played it for all it was worth, but with results that were most unsatisfactory to himself.

Under the operation of the system the money in his pocket melted as if in a furnace.

He declared that he had never known a bank to play in such luck; but he continued to "buck" against it bravely, sure that the luck must soon turn, and knowing that when it did turn his winnings would come with a rush.

It did not turn, or turned only enough to draw him further into the fight, and the upshot of the encounter was that he went down into his pocket for the last time, lost his last stake, and was compelled to admit that he was "gone broke."

"How much of a stake do you want to go out of town with?" inquired Bart, with his customary liberality toward fellow professionals who had been cleaned out.

"Not a dollar," sharply replied Thistlewood, who had not neglected his drinks during the game, and was evidently feeling his oats.

"You don't say so."

"I do, though. All I want is a stake that will help me to break this bank, and I mean to break it before I leave this town."

"I can't stake you for that, my friend," observed Bart.

"I don't want you to. I know where I can get a stake—as big a stake as I care to ask for—and I am going to get it right now."

"I don't think you will get it," observed Bart, as the other turned to leave the room.

"What do you know about it?"

"I am sure that you won't get it."

"Come, now; what do you mean by that? What do you know about it, I say?"

"You can't get it, Mr. Thistlewood, because she is out of town."

"She? Who's she?"

"Miss Seaver, of course."

Thistlewood's face fell, and he took his seat again.

"You do know something about it," said he. "I hope you are not running a saw on me."

"Not a bit of it. I am giving it to you as straight as a line. She has left Crosscut, and I

don't know where she has gone to, and nobody else knows. She may return in a few days, or may not return at all. Nobody knows anything about it. I've a notion that she is on the trail of Dan Dillon."

Thistlewood's face darkened, and he uttered a savage oath.

"So you see," continued Bart, "you will have to fall back on me, and I will let you have any reasonable sum you can ask for, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"I want you to answer a question or two. I am pretty well posted about your relations with the young lady who calls herself Miss Seaver; but I don't know when and where you married her. Will you give me the place and the date?"

"I don't know why I shouldn't," replied Thistlewood, who was taken a bit by surprise. "We were married about two years ago, in Kansas City. I don't remember the exact date. Why do you want to know that?"

"I have been getting a little curious about her husbands."

"What do you mean by her husbands? I know that she married a man who lived somewhere about here; but he is dead."

"And she has got the 'boodle.' The fact is, Mr. Thistlewood, that she seems to have married men miscellaneous. I judge by what she has told me that it must have been while you were her husband that she married Blant Suffield."

"Blant Suffield? Who is he?"

"A rather notorious man, who holds up stages, and generally goes for what don't belong to him, in this region."

"She had no right to marry him," replied Thistlewood with an oath. "I am her only lawful husband."

"I am afraid that you have not a very strong hold on her. Just now she wants Dan Dillon, and I think she has gone to hunt him. Has she ever got a divorce from you?"

"Never."

"Are you sure?"

"If she had, I would have heard of it."

"That is all I wanted to know. How much money do you want, my friend?"

Thistlewood named a reasonable sum, which was given him.

"I am going to skip the town, Mr. Scammell," said he. "I will come back and tackle your bank before long. At the same time I will look after my wife."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BART'S BONANZA.

"THAT is all very well as far as it goes," was Baby Bart's mental remark when he had secured a good supply of cash and valuable information from the high-toned sport who had robbed his partner.

But it did not go far enough.

He had got a hold on old man Seaver's widow, which he believed he could use effectively in one direction at least; but he wanted a stronger hold.

The money he had won from Thistlewood took him a step further toward the reinstatement of the exiled King of Crosscut.

The remaining officers and directors of the bank were struggling along, doing their best to keep the concern from utter bankruptcy, but had been having a hard time of it, and were nearly ready to give up the struggle, when they were pleasantly surprised.

Bart Scammell came forward, and paid up every dollar of the assessment that had been levied on Dan Dillon's stock.

He only made the condition that Dan's name should still be carried on the list of directors.

As this payment set the bank on its feet again, the condition was gladly accepted, and Bart was recognized as the proxy of his absent partner.

He made further inquiries concerning the cause and manner of Effie Seaver's absence, and discovered that Skinny Mike, who had recently been often employed by her, had disappeared when she did, and the supposition was that he had accompanied her.

This information caused Baby Bart to hunger and thirst for the bodily presence of Skinny Mike.

"What's that young scalawag got to do with her?" was the question he asked himself again and again.

It could only be answered by the capture of the vagrant lad, and by a vigorous attempt to squeeze his secrets out of him.

But the woman and the young scalawag were both conspicuous by their absence from Crosscut, and he could only wait and bide his time.

In the mean time he made a clean sweep of Dan's indebtedness, and busied himself in piling up more money for his partner.

The next development came to him unexpectedly and accidentally.

A Grass Valley man, who came to Crosscut with the intention of painting the town a sanguine hue, happened to fall among thieves, like the gentleman of old times who went down to Jericho.

That is to say, that the Crosscutters and their whisky proved to be too much for him, and he fell early in the engagement, coming out of the

encounter with no money and scarcely any clothes, a fit subject for the hospital.

Bart Scammell was the Good Samaritan who took him in and cared for him, supplying all his wants, until he was in a condition to care for himself.

It was natural that Sandy Rupper, the Grass Valley man, should wish to do something for his benefactor, and he did what he could.

What he did surprised and gratified Bart exceedingly.

"I've got suthin' about me, boss," said he, "that you mought be able to use in some way, and I want to give it to you, 'cause you've been so good to me."

"I don't want anything of yours, my friend," replied Bart.

"Well, I dunno. Wait till you ketch onto 't. I'm the man w'ot found the body of that bank cashier who shot himself out Grass Valley way."

"Ah!" exclaimed Bart, who instantly connected the dead cashier with the downfall of his partner.

"I found the feller's corpus," continued Sandy, "and I s'arched it then and thar. Somebody had to s'arch him, you see, and it was nateral that I, bein' the fu'st on the ground, should do the job. In one o' the pockets I found suthin'."

"How much?" inquired Bart, who remembered how thoroughly the robbers were reported to have gone through Abijah Binley.

"Twarn't money. Nary red. Jest a bit o' paper, kinder crumpled up. I could read enough to get a kind o' general idee o' what it 'mounted to, and I 'lowed I'd keep it, thinkin' I mought make it pay some time. But I struck a good thing jest then—that's how I got the money I lost here in Crosscut—and I stuck to that until it gi'n out. Then I kem on here to see w'ot kind o' spec I mought make outen that bit o' paper. But I didn't do nothin' with it, 'cause she was away, and then I got sewed up, and here 'tis."

Bart seized the paper eagerly, excited by the one word *she*, and devoured it with his eyes.

As he expected, it was a bonanza for him.

It was a note in a woman's hand, and undoubtedly written by Effie Seaver, as she had been silly enough to sign her name to it.

In it she gave Abijah Binley specific instructions about the robbery of the bank, directing him above all things to take Dan Dillon's box of securities, and promising to meet the cashier at Grass Valley in a day or two.

This was the further hold that Baby Bart wanted, and he fastened on it.

"What will you take for this, Sandy?" he asked.

"Nothin' from you, boss. Ef it's any use to you, jest go ahead. 'Twon't be anythin' like w'ot I owe you, anyhow."

"I will keep it, then, and will give you what you need in the way of money."

What Bart hungered and thirsted for then was an immediate interview with Effie Seaver.

The chance came to him, just as his other chances had come.

It has been said that all things come to those who wait.

She returned to Crosscut, and the fact of her arrival was directly made known through the length and breadth of the town.

But she was by no means as popular as she had been, and it was speedily evident to her that she was not the queen she once was.

To be sought by so many men, and to encourage the advances of most, if not all of them, was a situation that had some decided disadvantages. It could not last long.

She must inevitably be found out, and in time must choose among them.

She had been found out.

Several of the leading Crosscutters had talked the matter over among themselves, had compared notes, and had pronounced the whole thing a sell.

Her mysterious absences, too, were quoted against her, and the story had got out that she was, or had been, the wife of Blant Suffield.

There were, also, other stories afloat about her—the filmy fabric of insinuation and innuendo—which were growing like the marvelous narrative of the three black crows, connecting her with Abijah Binley and the robbery of the Crosscut Bank.

If Bart Scammell was responsible for any of these reports, he was not directly responsible, and she could not have traced them to him if she had tried.

It was mean in Bart, perhaps; but it is often necessary to fight meanness with meanness.

It was certain that her popularity had decreased, and that a strong current of sympathy had set in for the ex-King of Crosscut.

As she had returned triumphant, having drank deeply of the cup of revenge, she would not have troubled herself in the least about the disapproval of all Crosscut, had it not been for one point.

That point was the important question of cash.

A legal proceeding, instituted by old man Seaver's nephew, involving her right to the possession of her late husband's property would shortly be brought to trial, and she felt the need of having the public on her side.

Therefore she was willing to regain, as she believed she easily could, her lost popularity, and was especially anxious to conciliate Bart Scammell.

But he did not care to be conciliated just then.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BART SPRINGS HIS MINE.

BABY BART saw his opportunity, but was in no hurry to embrace it.

As he wished to strengthen his hold upon the woman as much as possible, there was another matter to be attended to before he was ready to interview her.

Skinny Mike had returned with her, and Bart, believing him to be a repository of secrets, wanted to get hold of him and squeeze some of them out of him.

That chance, too, came to him with reasonable celerity.

As soon as the vagrant lad returned to Crosscut he was paid off by his employer, and she, as was always the case with tools for which she had no further use, cut him loose and turned him adrift, bidding him go about his business.

The business that he went about was the consumption of the extract of cereals, familiarly known in Crosscut as bug-juice.

He carried it on so rapidly and successfully that in a short time all his money had been melted into bug-juice, and his unfortunate body had absorbed all the bug-juice, and he had become physically ill and incompetent.

It was in that condition that he was found by the man who wanted him.

Bart had caused the vagrant lad to be watched, and when the pear was ripe he plucked it.

He easily inveigled Mike into his saloon, and proceeded to raise him from the low ground of sorrow to the heights of contentment.

But there was a condition attached to this deed of beneficence.

After assuring the lad that he would be well cared for, and giving him a glimpse of the bright future that would be prepared for him, he informed him that he might pay for these favors by merely telling his benefactor the story of his employment by Miss Seaver and his wanderings in the company of that lady.

Skinny Mike agreed to this without the least hesitation.

He had even less sense of moral obligations than legal ones, and his association with Effie Seaver and Blant Suffield had not tended to develop the better side of his character.

Supported and encouraged by a liberal but judicious allowance of bug-juice, he gave a complete account of his services to the lady in question, up to the time when he was paid off.

The first development was startling.

Mike had carried a written message from her to Blant Suffield the day before the robbery of the absconding cashier.

Bart put the message and the robbery together, and easily drew his own conclusions.

The next development was yet more interesting as it put Bart on the trail of his friend.

It appeared that Mike had carried a verbal message from Effie Seaver to Suffield, telling him when and by what route Dan Dillon was to leave Crosscut.

The result of that communication was the capture of Dan by the brigands, and the visit of Miss Seaver to their den.

Mike went on to tell what happened, up to the escape of Dan and Bert Edes.

"So she wanted to hang him!" exclaimed Bart, boiling over with wrath. "Oh, the wolf! But of course she wasn't going to let up on him after he had got away. I want to know what happened then. Drive another nail in your coffin, boy, and tell me all you know about it."

The lad drove a big nail, and proceeded to tell the story of the pursuit and discovery of Dan, the abduction of Zanita Castana, her disappearance on the plain, the unsuccessful search for her, and the subsequent return of his employer and himself to Crosscut.

Bart was by this time nearly frantic with rage.

His customary coolness deserted him for the moment, and he raved and swore at the wicked woman who had been guilty of such shocking crimes.

"Oh, the wretch!" he cried. "Oh, the wolf! Oh, the wildcat! That is the worst of all she has done—the worst she ever could do. Boy! you ought to be strung up on every tree within ten miles of Crosscut for helping her in those cursed schemes."

Mike protested that he "didn't know nothin' about no schemes," and Bart faithfully kept the promises he had made him.

Dan Dillon's partner was then ready to spring his mine for the benefit of Effie Seaver; but he gave his passion time to cool and harden before he called on her.

He found her glad to see him.

Not only apparently glad, but actually glad; because she was beginning to feel strongly the need of conciliating him.

"Glad to see you back, miss," was his greeting.

"And I am glad to get back," she answered.

"Lots of your friends have been worrying

about you. All Crosscut was crazy to know what had become of you."

"I have heard of that, Mr. Scammell; but I am not responsible for the worry. I have given no person a right to be uneasy about me. I have wanted friends, being a lone young widow here, and I believed that I could count on you as one, though you were a little cross when we last met."

"You may bet your life, Miss Seaver, that I am as true a friend to you as you are to me."

She was so cool in speaking of her ignominious expulsion of Bart as a little crossness on his part, that he could not help making a bit of a grimace.

"I have been looking after your interests while you were away," he remarked.

"You are very kind, Mr. Scammell."

"I have looked after them so sharply that I have found out a heap about you."

"Indeed, sir!"

The words and the tone were not expressive of a friendly interest, and she was by no means anxious that any person should find out too much about her.

"Yes'm. I've found out so much that I begin to feel like an old friend and partner of yours. Hope you had a pleasant trip. Did you find Dan Dillon?"

"Did I find Dan Dillon? What do you mean, Mr. Scammell?"

"Thought you had gone to look for him. Well, never mind. If you ever should find him, and should take it into your head to marry him, I would advise you as a friend to first get rid of some of the husbands you have on your hands."

Clearly the man had come to her as an enemy, and she must treat him as such; but there might still be a chance of turning him into a friend, and she must conciliate him if possible.

"What husbands do you refer to?" she asked.

"Eugene Thistlewood for one."

Her face blazed with indignation; but she answered him with a fair degree of composure.

"Has he been here again? Has he told you that? I never thought he could be such a fool. I admit that I married him, when I was young and ignorant; but I was compelled to get a divorce from him."

"He didn't tell me that. In fact, he was fool enough to deny that there had been any divorce. And you were so young and ignorant that you married Blant Suffield while Thistlewood was your husband, and then your youth and ignorance led you on to marry old man Seaver, and then you struck Dan Dillon again. Well, there's no use talking—youth and innocence are wonderful and unaccountable things."

"You insult me, Mr. Scammell."

"Don't want to. Only trying to advise you as a friend. I would advise you, too, when you set a cashier to rob a bank, not to send your instructions to him in writing. That is bad business, and is apt to tell against you when the writing happens to be found."

"Do you charge me with that, sir?"

"Not I. It is your own handwriting that makes the charge. And I don't know but I ought to advise you, the next time you want a robber robbed, to employ some safer messenger than Skinny Mike to carry the news to Blant Suffield."

The woman's face was very pale by that time; but she kept her temper admirably, and actually burst into laughter.

"This is too funny," said she. "I can't help laughing at the ridiculous stories you have been stuffed with, and the greediness with which you have devoured them. Take a glass of wine with me, Mr. Scammell, and I will explain those matters to you, and we will laugh at them together."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Thistlewood. I am not drinking now, and I don't feel like laughing. If I wanted to poison myself, Crosscut whisky would suit me as well as your wine. It may not be quite so quick; but it gets its work in mighty sure. What I mean is business, strictly."

"It is a mean, dirty, undermining business that you have engaged in, and all to crush a poor, weak woman. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. And so you have got hold of that drunken and worthless vagabond, and have listened to a pack of silly lies and believed them. Why, nobody but a fool would believe that young rascal's word if he swore to it on a stack of Bibles."

"I believed it," answered Bart, "without any swearing. I also believed him when he told me how you set Blant Suffield to waylay my partner and carry him to his den, and how you went there and wanted to hang Dan."

Again she laughed scornfully.

"How would you like to have the hanging trick played on yourself, Mrs. Thistlewood? If I should tell the people here in Crosscut what I know about you, they would rise up and stretch your neck without stopping to take a drink."

"I dare you to do it!" she cried defiantly.

"I won't, though. I don't propose to have a hand in your hanging, dare or no dare. It is enough for me to know that the Thistlewood business will knock you out of old man Seaver's property, what is left of it. God knows that you deserve hanging. How else will you ever

pay for the death of that poor girl, Dan's sweetheart, whom you murdered after you had stolen her from him?"

"I did not kill that girl."

"But you were responsible for her death, I verily believe, and, as sure as I live, you shall be held responsible for it. You are not going to get off so easy as you think you will."

She clinched her hands tightly on the arms of her chair, and glared savagely at her accuser, like a wolf in a trap.

Then she spoke, in tones that were strange and harsh, but full of firmness.

"Nor am I going to be crushed by a gambler and a drunkard. Do your worst, you mean hound! I dare and defy you to do your worst. That girl is dead, and the man who spurned me suffers. Nothing can hurt me now."

She had hardly finished speaking when a change came over her face.

A voice was indistinctly heard in the hall.

It was the commonplace voice of one of the waiters of the hotel, and at such a time it sounded more than usually commonplace.

But it brought joyful news to one person in that room and terrible news to the other.

"This way, Mr. Dillon," was what the waiter said.

Then there was a knock at the door, and Baby Bart quickly opened it, and Dan Dillon walked in.

CHAPTER XXXVI. BACK TO LIFE.

BERT EDES was in a peculiar and unpleasant position during the fight that followed the breaking forth of the bandits.

He heard the firing and the yelling, and knew that a sharp fight was going on, but was unable from his perch in the lights even to guess which side had won.

When the noise was ended he was able to judge that the Suffield gang had not been driven back into their den, and from that fact he concluded that they had either vanquished their antagonists or had been exterminated.

This, however, was a thoroughly unsatisfactory conclusion.

After a while he managed, with considerable pain and peril, to work his way over to the other side of the light.

Then he was able to look down into the valley where he saw the camp-fire burning as before.

But he could not decide whether his friends were still there or the camp had fallen into the hands of their enemies.

It would have been possible to send his voice down there and ask information of the state of affairs, but he did not dare to do that.

If the Suffield gang had won it would be anything but healthy for him to make them aware of his existence and location, as they would inevitably slaughter him for what they might style his treachery.

So there was nothing for him to do but to get such sleep as he could get and wait until morning.

In the morning he was sure that the people below there were his friends, and he called to them and got brief particulars of their victory.

Then he scrambled down as fast as he could to congratulate them and be welcomed by them.

He was further rejoiced by a hot and good breakfast, which made him forget his painful and lonely vigil on the light.

Dan Dillon was then very anxious to break camp in the valley and go elsewhere to look after some important matters that claimed his attention.

He had promised their lives to the two captured bandits on the condition that they would guide him in the first place to the camp from which Zanita had disappeared, and in the second place to search all the hiding-places of the gang for the escaped leader.

The captive who had been wounded was able to start, but Dan was held back by the wounded of his own party.

Two of them were so badly hurt that they were not fit to ride, and one of the two was the old man who was known as Mr. Camarado.

Dan would have left them there in charge of two of Nat Burnett's cowboys, with the expectation of returning soon and taking them on to Crosscut, but the old man begged him so piteously not to leave him behind that he was obliged to hesitate.

"I know, Mr. Dillon," said Mr. Camarado, "that you are going to look for that dear child, and I must be with you in the search. If you should find her, alive or dead, and I should not be there, it would break my heart. I am not so badly hurt as you think. I shall be able to mount my horse soon—very soon—and then we will search for her together."

Dan was sorely troubled.

It would pain him greatly to refuse that pitiful appeal, and yet he was exceedingly anxious to begin the search.

Nat Burnett took him aside.

"You may as well humor the old man," said his friend. "It would be much better to do so. There is nothing to gain by being in a hurry. Look the facts in the face. That is a hard way sometimes, but always the best way. The odds

are that the poor girl is dead. There, Dan, don't take it so. It is safest to look on the dark side and to expect the worst. How could she have lived, set adrift on the plain, alone and at night? You know the trail we passed over. Not a sign of a settlement anywhere near it. I can't think of an earthly chance that she may have had to save her life. You must remember that some days have passed since she disappeared from that camp. Before now she must have perished or have found shelter. A few hours more or less, or a day more or less, can neither help nor hinder the search now, and the old man, as he says, will soon be able to ride."

Dan allowed himself to be influenced by his friend's arguments, and consented to wait.

But he endeavored to make good use of the time he spent in waiting, by doing the best he could toward healing the old man's wound, with the view of getting him into condition to travel as soon as possible.

In this he was ably assisted by Bert Edes, who was assiduous in his attentions to Mr. Camarado, waiting on him with the greatest care, and never allowing a want to go unsupplied.

But Bert evidently had something on his mind—something that gave him a perplexed, and at times a mysterious look.

When he was on his knees at Mr. Camarado's couch, the lad gazed at him earnestly, and at other times he would stand and stare at him strangely.

Dan Dillon noticed these performances, and asked him the reason of his strange conduct.

"Thar's reason a-plenty," answered Bert. "Mr. Dillon, do you know who that old man is?"

Dan was instantly struck by an idea, and it struck him hard.

"What?" he exclaimed. "No—it can't be. Do you really think it is?"

"So you've dropped on it, too. I've had it runnin' in my head fur some time, and now and then, when I've looked at him cluss, I've been e'ena'most sart'in. But it was so onpossible that I didn't give way to it."

"You believe, then, that Mr. Camarado is old man Seaver?"

"Hain't a doubt o' that now, Mr. Dillon. I stood out ag'inst it all I could, 'cause I saw him pushed over into that canyon, and I looked down thar arterwards, and knowed that no man could ha' tumbled into it and lived. But I give in now. He's old man Seaver."

"I never saw him in Crosscut but once or twice," said Dan, "and then scarcely noticed him; but the same idea has taken hold of me now and then."

"I know him like a book, Mr. Dillon, and can't be fooled in him."

"There is one way to settle the question, Bert, and we will settle it right now. We will go and ask him."

They went to the old man together, and Dan seated himself at his side, while Bert stood near.

"How does your arm feel now, Mr. Seaver?" inquired Dan in his usual tones.

The old man started and looked sharply at his questioner.

"Do you know me, then?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"How long? When did you drop on it?"

"A few minutes ago. But Bert Edes says that he has been sure of it for some time."

"The boy ought to know me. He was a herder on my ranch six months or so, and went with me on that fatal trip. If I should get shaved and have my hair cut, everybody would know me, though I've grown fully ten years older in a short time. I wanted to be dead, my boy—dead and forgotten. But when I got headed up this way I began to feel differently, and I had made up my mind that before we got to Crosscut I would tell you all about myself. Maybe it is as well that you saved me the trouble, of breaking the news. Would you like to know how I came back to life?"

Both men were anxious to know, and Josiah Seaver told his story.

CHAPTER XXXVII. THE OLD MAN'S STORY.

"I SUPPOSE," said the old man, "that both of you know how I came to leave my ranch up here and set out for Texas to start a new place."

"There must have been plenty of talk about it in Crosscut, and no doubt some people thought that I was a little off."

"But there was sense mixed with that notion, too."

"I knew that the South was the place to raise cattle, and the North the place to fatten them, and so I allowed to start a breeding farm down there, to supply stock for my ranch up here."

"The foolishness of it was in marrying that young woman."

"I might have known that she was after nothing but my money; but there's no fool like an old fool, and the smartest of us are liable to get picked up."

"Everything went on nicely enough, as I suppose you know, until I got killed. I believe that Bert there told you that I was killed."

"That was why I sent him from Crosscut,"

replied Dan Dillon—"to be out of the way of the trial."

"Just so. It was a little after noon when that little affair came off."

"We had stopped for dinner, and I had eaten and drank well, and was in a good humor, talking to her of how I was going to make the Texas ranch pay, and of what I meant to do for her."

"I was powerful fond of her, and she never gave me the least reason to suppose that she wasn't powerful fond of me."

"But all that was in the future, and what she wanted was a big pile of money where she could lay her hands right on it, with no old man to bother her."

"It's a mortal fact, Dan, that there's no fool like an old fool. I have no doubt now that she had been plotting to get rid of me, every foot of the way. I allowed that the men were getting too far ahead of us with the sheep, and sent Bert Edes on to get them to try to hold up."

"Then it was that she asked me to take a little walk with her—to settle my dinner, as she said. I took the walk, and it did settle my dinner, and settled me with the dinner."

"We had halted at the edge of the plain, near some broken ground that lay to the left of us; but I would never have thought that through that broken ground ran the queerest canyon I had ever come across, and I've seen a sight of them."

"You must have been well up to the west of the mountain range," suggested Dan.

"So we were, and I was aiming to strike down through New Mexico, and like as not to settle there, instead of going to Texas."

"Well, she led me through that broken ground, until we came to the canyon, and then you ought to have heard her take on. 'You ought to have seen, too, how pretty she looked, as she stood there at the edge of the canyon, and called me to come and take a squint into it.'"

Dan Dillon, who was sufficiently experienced in her ways, shuddered as he thought of her dangerous beauty.

"She just raved about what she called the wonder of that canyon, in regular theater style, pouring out the prettiest and biggest words she had in stock, so that it was worth a good man's while to stand and listen to her."

"Who could have thought that she had the devil in her right then, bigger than a full-grown grizzly?"

"Anyhow, I never thought of anything of the kind as I waltzed up to the canyon and looked over with her."

"It was such a clean cut rift in the rock, with nothing to show that 'twas there until you got right onto it—so narrow and so deep—dark as pitch down there, it seemed—nothing to be heard but the falling of water that came from you couldn't guess where—that I was nearly as wild about it as she was, though I couldn't talk about it as she did."

"She was going on just the same while I was taking it in, but all the time was edging around behind me, so as to get a good chance to make an end of me."

"All of a sudden she gave me a push, and over I went!"

"As I fell I heard the galloping of a horse, and thought of Bert Edes."

"Of course I fully expected to be killed right away; but if you will believe me, the only feeling I had just then was that of shame at having been fooled so by that woman."

"As luck would have it, I was near the waterfall that I found out afterward, and the canyon was more broken up there than it was below."

"I dropped into a sort of hollow in a ledge that was filled with mud, and that broke my fall a bit, though I was stunned and bruised pretty badly."

"How long I lay there I don't know; but I reckon they had all gone away when my wits came to me; anyhow, I was so infernally ashamed of myself, that I wouldn't for any money have let them know that I wasn't dead."

"After a while I grew used to the darkness, and began to work my way down, as there was no chance to go up."

"At that part of the canyon, where the rocks jutted out from one side and the other so that they nearly touched in places, it wasn't so hard a job as you might think it to be; but it was tough enough, and I was a used up man when I got to the bottom."

"I picked up some bits of wood that had fallen in from above, and made a fire and laid down and had a long snooze."

"Before lying down I wound up my watch, which hadn't stopped, and noticed that it was pretty late at night; so you can see I was as cool as a cucumber."

"In the morning I started my fire again, and thought over matters a bit."

"The love-sickness was all gone, completely knocked out of me; but there's no telling how disgusted I was with myself and the world."

"Didn't feel a bit angry with the woman—didn't care what became of her—didn't worry about anything; but was just filled to the brim with the notion that such an infernal fool as I

was deserved killing, and ought never to show his face among folks again."

"I made up my mind then and there that if I should happen to live—and I cared mighty little whether I lived or died—I would hide myself from everybody I had ever known, and let them believe that I was dead."

"My revolver had stuck to me, and it was loaded, and I had some cartridges about me; so I allowed that I would get along somehow."

"It was while I was sitting there by my fire that I found the gold color there in the canyon."

"Then the craze came on me—you know what it is, Dan."

"I doubt if even a dying man, on catching sight of color, could keep himself from going for it. 'Of course I forgot everything else, and began to scramble in the gravel. I had no pan; but there was plenty of water, and I could use my hat for a washer, and could collect the nuggets, if not the scales.'"

"I soon worked myself into a fever, like a fool, and, being faint from lack of food, and badly used up by my rough experience, became so exhausted that I went off again."

"When I came to my senses the craze was over, and I cursed myself for an idiot, declaring that I ought to have better sense than to gather gold to tempt some other woman to swindle or murder me."

"I started to work my way out of the canyon, and it was a hard job, too, as I could scarcely put one foot before the other."

"But I came out at last into a lonely valley, and there I met that dear girl who has been stolen from us, and she took me to her father who has been murdered, and you know the rest."

"When I looked at myself in a glass it seemed to me that I had grown ten years older since I left Crosscut, and I let my hair and beard grow, and settled upon it that I would remain dead, as I was doubtless believed to be dead."

"Would you have been content," demanded Dan, "to let that woman enjoy the fruits of her crime in peace, and riot in the possession of your property?"

"I cared nothing for that. I looked upon her as an instrument of Providence—the Fool Killer that we have heard of. No amount of property would have tempted me to go back among the people who knew what an infernal fool I had made of myself, and I would not be here now, except for the sake of that dear child of Castana's."

"If Zanita is dead, that woman shall suffer as long as I can pursue her."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SEARCH FOR ZANITA.

JOSIAH SEAVER'S narrative was not very interesting to Dan Dillon, who had already guessed out its details pretty fairly.

It only served to make him more eager to go in search of Zanita, and more impatient of delay.

It was possible, he believed, that she might yet be living, and he could not afford to lose the faintest chance.

If she should be found dead, or should never be found, there would be nothing left but vengeance, and that should be sure and terrible.

Before morning arrived the old man declared that he would without doubt be able to travel the next day, and preparations were made for an early start.

Two of Burnett's cowboys were left in camp, to care for the other wounded man, with instructions to take him on to Crosscut as soon as he should be able to bear the journey.

With the others, and accompanied by the two captives, who were quite docile and thankful for the sparing of their lives, Dan started southward in search of Zanita.

The party was led by the prisoners direct to the last camp that Blant Suffield's men had made before reaching their den.

There they stopped to refresh themselves and to consider the question of the Mexican girl's disappearance.

After Dan Dillon had listened to all that the captured outlaws could tell him concerning the conduct of Suffield and the woman during the journey from Secret Gulch, as well as the condition of Zanita, he carefully drew his own conclusions.

It was not to be supposed that Suffield had spirited her out of the camp, or that she had been killed.

Nothing could be more certain than the fact that the bandit leader wanted to keep her and to protect her for his own selfish purposes, and she could not have been killed without the knowledge of some members of the party.

Whatever had been done with her had been done quietly and secretly.

She must have slipped away of her own account, or have been sent away by Effie Seaver.

Dan was strongly inclined to the latter opinion, and not alone, because he knew that Blant Suffield had charged the woman with having been responsible for Zanita's disappearance.

He was then fully able, in the light of his own experience, to estimate Effie Seaver's capacity

for extravagant jealousy, with or without cause, and he could easily believe that the attentions of her ex-husband to Zanita had excited that passion until she determined to get rid of the girl at any cost.

He also knew that Zanita had been bound at night, and it was reasonable to suppose that she had not been turned loose by Suffield or any of the men, and that she could not have untied herself.

There was nobody left but Effie Seaver who would have been likely to aid her escape.

In view of the woman's probable motive, it must be concluded that she had set Zanita adrift in the expectation that she would perish on the plain.

Yet it was possible that she had persuaded the girl to believe that she would be picked up by her friends.

Thus Dan had reached by his reasoning what proved to be the real facts of the case.

It was probable that Zanita had started down the trail, but highly improbable that she could have kept it in the darkness.

In fact, it was known that she had not kept it, as otherwise she would have been found by the party that followed the gang.

Therefore she must be looked for on one side and the other of the trail.

Dan and his friends began the search systematically, and did their work thoroughly, carefully and closely examining each side of the trail for a considerable distance eastward and westward, and to an extent of several miles in a southerly direction.

Not a ravine or gully or hole in the ground was left unsearched within that range; not a bunch of timber or clump of bushes but was looked into; not a rise or fall of the ground in any direction but was examined.

Yet they failed to find the girl or any trace of her.

Zip was with them, and was commanded and implored to seek her trail; but the hound was utterly at fault, as several days had passed since her disappearance, and rain had fallen.

Dan Dillon was then completely downcast and dejected, and again had come into his face that hard and set look which told of the hunger and thirst of vengeance.

"I am afraid we will have to give it up, old man," said Nat Burnett, who was practical as well as sympathetic.

"Not yet," hoarsely answered Dan. "We must look further down the trail."

"But it is out of reason to think that she could have got any further in that direction without meeting us. The only chance is that she may have made a longer stretch off the trail than we have thought possible, and I can't imagine her alive, as there is not the faintest sign of a settlement anywhere about here."

"You're off a little thar, boss," remarked Bert Edes. "Tain't far from here that Mr. Dillon and I found a ranch and got foddered up, when we had got away from Suffield's gang."

"That's so!" eagerly exclaimed Dan. "Bert, my boy, you are a brick. Why couldn't I have thought of that? The ranch is a long way off the trail; but there is a chance that she may have reached it. Take us there, Bert. I believe you can smell your way through this country."

The lad surely acted as if he was following his nose, when he led the party into the broken ground at the east of the trail.

There was not the faintest sign of anything to guide him, so far as anybody else could see; yet he rode straight on, without the least hesitation, as if the point he was aiming for lay right before his eyes.

As the party approached a deep gully, Zip for the first time gave signs of animation and of real interest in the search.

He ran excitedly here and there, and finally halted at the edge of the gully, where he barked and howled by turns.

"She is there!" exclaimed Josiah Seaver. "We will find her dead! She has fallen in there in the darkness, and has been killed!"

Most of the party dismounted, and walked to the edge of the gully.

On the ground was a scrap of muslin, and then it was no wonder that Zip had stopped there to bark; for the scrap had been torn from Zanita's dress.

The bottom of the gully could not be seen from the edge, and Dan Dillon wanted to descend into it, but was restrained by his friends, who feared that he would be overcome by what he was sure to find there.

Bert Edes, the lightest weight of the party, was lowered into the gully, and soon announced that he had reached the bottom, while the others waited almost breathlessly for the report of his find.

When it came, the searchers were so astonished that they hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry.

"Thar ain't nothin' down here!" was the shout he sent up.

He was directed to look carefully up and down the gully, and he did so, but found nothing else to report.

"Perhaps there has been a heavy rain here," suggested Dan, "and the water has washed the body down the gully."

His companions were all quite sure that there had been no such rain in that region.

Zip had left the gully when the men came there, and suddenly he began to bark joyfully at a little distance to the eastward.

Dan ran to him, and found in a bit of soft ground the prints of a woman's shoe, together with those of a man's heavy boot.

The rain that had fallen had not been heavy enough to obliterate them at that spot, though no trace of them could be discovered in the stony tract beyond.

"She has found a friend, Dan!" exclaimed Nat Burnett.

"Let us hope so. If she has, it must be the ranchman who entertained Bert and me. We must have the boy out of there in a hurry, and make him guide us to the ranch."

Bert was quickly hauled up, and all remounted their horses, and he led them forward.

Less than half an hour's ride brought them to the ranch, where they were noisily welcomed by the barking of several dogs that resented the intrusion of Zip.

As they rode up to the house, who was it but Zanita who threw open the door and ran out with joyful cries to greet them!

Yes, it was Zanita, alive, well, uninjured, and at that moment fully as bright as ever!

Dan threw himself from his horse, and Josiah Seaver climbed down as quickly as he could, and those two were even more overcome by the happy meeting than was Zanita herself.

The ranchman came out, recognized Dan Dillon and Bert Edes, welcomed the entire party, and invited them into the house, where Zanita told the story of her escape.

Everything had happened pretty much as Dan had reasoned it out, up to the time when she came to the conclusion that she had lost her way, and had restrained herself as she was about to fall into the gully.

Then she was startled by a deep growl, and by the dim vision of some black object that was moving toward her in the darkness.

She, of course, supposed the object to be a wild beast, gave herself up for lost, and sunk upon the ground in a dead swoon.

When she came to her senses a man was kneeling at her side, and a big black dog was crouched near enough to lick her hands.

"I was out that night, as luck would have it," the ranchman explained to his guests. "Somethin' had been playin' the wild with my sheep the night afore, and I had started out with old Hero to kinder guard the ranch and look fur the crittur if he should turn up ag'in."

"I had got down nigh the gully that you've heard of, when Hero sot up the kind of a bark that lets me know I'm wanted."

"I hurried to him, ready to shoot any varmint that he mought ha' skeered up, and that young lady thar was the varmint I found."

"I didn't shoot anythin' jest then."

"You kin bet your sweet lives that I was knocked all of a heap [by findin' her thar and wonderin' how she got thar."

"I fetched her to as soon as I could, made her swallow a drop of whisky, and took her on to the house, whar she told her story."

"The old woman and I did all we could to comfort her and keer for her, not only fur her own sweet sake but because she gi'n us the names of Dan Dillon and the boy who was with him here."

"The next day she wanted me to take her somewhar; but she didn't know whar, and no more did I; but I got her into the notion of stayin' here and restin' fur a while, and promised her that as soon as I could git off the ranch I'd take her up to Crosscut."

"But I'm powerful glad that she's found her friends so easy, and that's a fact."

Then Zanita had her say.

"When the dogs barked, and I saw such a big party ridin' up here, I was terribly frightened, thinking that those fearful men had sought me and found me at last."

"But I looked again, and saw you among them, dear Dan, and saw Mr. Camarado there too, and I had to stop to say a prayer before I could run out to meet you."

She was told of the pursuit and defeat of the marauders, but did not rejoice at the hard fate of those who had torn her from her home and friends.

"If they had not murdered my dear father," she said, "I could feel very sorry for them. Was she killed with them?"

"No such luck," answered Dan. "She had left them and gone to Crosscut before we overtook them, and we are going there to find her."

Dan got from the ranchman a horse for Zanita, for which he insisted on paying twice its value, and the next morning the party set out for Crosscut.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

WHEN Dan Dillon walked into Effie Seaver's room at the Longhorn Hotel, it was easy to see that his appearance was a terrible blow to her.

Baby Bart, who was watching her closely, perceived a good change in her.

She had started to her feet on hearing his

name, but held the back of her chair as she stood there, as if to keep herself from falling.

Her breath came in gasps, her face was deathly pale, and just then she had the look of a woman much beyond the age with which she was generally credited.

As Dan closed the door behind him, she was seized by a desperate resolution.

She stepped quickly to the bureau, and snatched a pistol that was lying there; but, Bart Scammell, who had not for a second taken his eyes from her, was quite as quick as she was.

He seized her hand, and quietly dispossessed her of the weapon.

Then she sunk back into her chair, and he turned to greet his friend.

"I was never so glad to see you in my life, Dan, and that is saying a heap. You have come just in time to assist at a little scene which is quite in the theatrical line. I have been calling this woman to account."

"That is what I am here for," said Dan.

He had naturally been pained, if not surprised at finding Bart there, presuming that the cause which had produced a rupture of their previous relations still existed; but his partner's tone and manner reassured him, and he perceived that another sort of rupture was then on the carpet.

"Your entrance," observed Bart, "interrupts the play, but may be expected to make it more dramatic—how much more, I can't say yet. Take a seat, pard, and I will tell you how far we have got."

Dan helped himself to a chair, and fastened his gaze on the woman, who fixed hers on the carpet.

"I have been talking to her about her goings on," continued Bart. "First I told her how she put up a job with Binley to rob the bank. I have been making a little business, you see, of finding her out. Then I explained to her the neat little scheme by which she got Blant suffield to go through the cashier when he was running away to meet her, as the poor devil believed. Then I described her arrangement with the same Mr. Suffield by which she caused you to be gobbled up, and how she wanted to hang you. I happened to observe just then that if I should tell the Crosscutters what I know about her, they would string her up without benefit of whisky; but that didn't phaze her—bless your heart! not a particle."

She looked up then, and her lip curled scornfully; but her face was still deathly pale.

"Then I came down to business," resumed Bart. "Such little matters as I have spoken of, and the fact that she married twice while Eugene Thistlewood was her real husband, were hardly worth mentioning. But I came down to business then, and informed her that she should be held responsible for the death of the girl she stole from down yonder where you were staying."

Dan Dillon started then, and his face darkened, while the woman assumed a triumphant air.

"And what do you think, Dan, this hellcat said then? She defied me, and dared me to do my worst. She declared that the girl was dead, and you were suffering, and she didn't care what happened."

"And I defy you again!" she cried. "Again I dare you to do your worst. Come, there are two of you now, and let us see what you can do! Two men—I suppose you count yourselves as men. You are big enough and strong enough, anyhow, and of course you are armed with plenty of pistols and things. What do you think you can do? A druukard and gambler has tried to crush me, and has made a flat failure. Now let the other thing try his hand—the pitiful coward who sneaked out of Crosscut because he was afraid of me!"

She clinched her hands on the arms of her chair, and stolidly awaited the onset.

"I was hot on your trail, madam," said Dan Dillon. "With a party of honest men I followed your friend, Suffield, up into the hills, to that hole in the rocks where I last had the misfortune to see you. It was hard to get at him there; but we brought him to bay, and had him penned like a rat in a hole."

"He tried to fight his way out, and now there are left alive only two of his gang, whose lives I spared because of the information they could give me."

"So that part of the account is pretty well settled."

The woman manifested a lively interest in this statement.

"Are you sure that you killed Suffield?" she asked.

"I am sure that we did not kill him," answered Dan. "He was the only one who escaped. But I will get him after awhile."

"Do you know where he went to?"

"I do not; but you will have no trouble in finding him, I suppose, when you want a useful friend. I thought it would be best to come here and call on you before I hunted him up, and I have brought something that may interest you."

"What is that, sir?"

"The proof that you murdered your last husband, Josiah Seaver."

Dan opened the door, and beckoned in Bart Edes.

"Here," said he, "is the evidence that I removed previous to your trial. It may still be of interest to some people in and about Crosscut. This young man, who has suffered from the misfortune of your acquaintance, saw you push Mr. Seaver into the canyon down yonder, and is ready to swear to that fact."

The woman smiled scornfully.

"That is nothing," said she. "If a thousand such as he should swear to what you say, it could not do me a bit of harm."

"Are you sure of that, madam?"

"Of course I am. I know enough of the law to be sure that when a person has once been acquitted on a charge of murder, that person can never be tried on that charge again."

"That is quite true," replied Dan. "But you have not yet been tried on the charge of attempted murder."

"Attempted murder? What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that you did not do your murderous work as well as you meant to do it, and fancied that you had done it."

"You are trying to scare me, you coward; but talk is cheap."

"And facts are stubborn things. The murdered man is here, alive and well, and capable of giving evidence against you, if he should care to do so."

Again Dan opened the door, and Josiah Seaver walked into the room.

He had been shaved then, and his hair had been trimmed, and he did not differ very materially from his former self.

As soon as the woman saw him she changed her tactics.

She stepped toward him, and held out her hand, her face wreathed in smiles.

"I am so glad to see you, Josiah," she said in her most honeyed tones. "How well you are looking! I am sure that you will not be so cruel as to bring any horrid charges against your little darling."

"Little devil, you had better say," grunted the old man. "Whether you call yourself a darling or a devil, I am happy to say that you don't belong to me, and that I am not in any way responsible for you. Since I have learned that you are not really my wife, I am satisfied, and you needn't try to disgust me any more."

She sat down and laughed.

"So, my dear Josiah, my precious old pet, has gone back on me with the rest. Ah! this is a wicked world, and there is no constancy in man. But he don't mean to worry his angel Effie, and he won't let those horrid men abuse her if he can help it."

"Give us no more of that!" broke in Bart Scammell. "We know that you are as shameless as you are vicious, and you will gain nothing here by making a spectacle of yourself. You are not going to get off so easy as you seem to think you will. You shall be held responsible for the death of the girl you stole from her friends, and shall be punished severely for that crime in one way or another."

The hard but triumphant look came into her face again as she answered.

"Try it on!" she cried. "Do your worst, you poor fool! I defy you and dare you as I did before. I did not kill the girl, and I defy the world to prove that I took her away from her home, or had anything to do with her death. But she is dead, and the man who scorned me and fancied her baby face may take that home to his heart and keep it there."

"Really," observed Dan, "you ought not to blame me for not choosing to become one of your many husbands."

"What have you gained by that? Where is the little fool who caught your eye and kept you from me at the last? You said that I could never hurt you. How do you feel now?"

Dan answered this taunt by opening the door and leading in Zanita.

The Mexican girl was pale and trembling; but Dan held her with his strong arm, and the presence of her friends reassured her.

Upon Effie Seaver, as she may still be called, the effect of the appearance of Zanita was startling.

The revival of Josiah Seaver was nothing to this.

When she saw her victim standing before her, living and lovely, preserved from the death that had seemed so certain, her successful rival in the affections of the only man the passionate and reckless woman had ever really loved, the sight drove her frantic.

With glaring eyes and clinched hands she rushed madly at the girl, but was caught by Baby Bart, who was compelled to use considerable force to restrain her.

Then she broke down, and he let her sink back into her chair.

"That is enough," she said, in broken tones.

"I know now that everything is against me. I give up. Go on, all of you, and do whatever you choose to do. I will confess anything you charge against me."

She took the jewelry from her ears, her hands and her neck, and laid all on the table.

"Here, old man, is part of your property, and

anything you can find in this room is yours. There is nothing else that I can give up."

"Keep the things," rejoined Josiah Seaver. "Nothing could persuade me to touch them. Keep everything of mine that you happen to have. But I will see to it that you get nothing more."

"I have no wish to harm you," said Dan Dillon, "and I hope you may live to atone for some of the wrong you have done."

"You are safe from me, too," observed Bart Scammell; "but I advise you to leave Crosscut, as it is not likely to be healthy for you here much longer."

Her visitors went out and left her alone.

"Dan!" she moaned, pitifully, stretching out her hands toward the man she had loved so strangely and so fiercely.

"Give me one more word, Dan!"

But he passed out without another word or another glance, and the door was closed upon her.

When inquiry was made for her at the Longhorn Hotel the next day, it produced the information that she had paid her bill and left the house, and nobody knew what had become of her.

CHAPTER XL.

THE QUEEN IN EXILE.

THE foiled and defeated woman was left alone with her griefs, her disappointments, her failures, and possibly her remorse.

It must have been a remorseful impulse that prompted the restitution to Josiah Seaver of so much of his property as remained in her possession.

But it could hardly be supposed that such a feeling would long abide with her.

When her accusers had left her, whether mercifully or unmercifully, she burst into a passion of tears, and for awhile gave herself up to violent and unrestrained emotion.

At last she roused herself suddenly, and, as if by a great effort, shook off everything that oppressed her.

It was with a swift and steady step that she approached the bureau and looked at herself in the mirror.

She saw there a face that seemed to have aged greatly within a short time, and from which much of the beauty had vanished.

But she knew how to repair the ravages of care and passion, and she proceeded to beautify herself until she was almost as radiant as ever.

She did not fail to secure upon her person the jewelry which Josiah Seaver had refused to accept, together with all the money she possessed, and it was not a small sum.

In the evening she did not go down to the hotel table, but had her supper brought to her room, and denied herself to all visitors.

Then she packed her trunk carefully and sent to the office for her bill.

When the clerk came up she paid her dues, directing him to send her trunks to an address she gave in Cheyenne.

At night she employed a waiter to go out and purchase for her a pair of saddle-bags and some other articles.

The other articles proved to be a quantity of crackers and cheese, some pistol cartridges, and a flask of liquor.

She placed these in one side of the saddle-bags, and stuffed into the other side some articles of clothing which she might need.

Then she carefully examined the revolver which Bart Scammell had replaced on the bureau, secured it upon her person by a belt that had been made for that purpose, and was ready for business.

It is probable that by that time her remorseful feelings had utterly vanished.

They had been succeeded by the idea of self-preservation, and it was high time that she was taking measures for her protection.

She was well enough acquainted with the fickle and impulsive nature of the citizens of Crosscut to know that, as Baby Bart had told her, the town would not be healthy for her when the disclosures that must inevitably leak out should be absorbed by the population.

Therefore she determined to leave Crosscut as quietly and secretly as she could.

Her purpose and destination may be discovered by means of a remark she made to her image in the glass just before she left the room.

"Well, my dear, you are not looking so badly after all. Keep a stiff upper lip, and you will pull through and astonish the world. Just now we will fall back on dear little Blanty, and I think we can find him before any of the rest of the hunters get at him. If he don't feel inclined to behave himself, we will know how to make him."

Carrying her saddle-bags on her arm, she went to the livery stable attached to the hotel, and engaged a good saddle-horse, saying that she might need it for two or three days.

She had often had horses from that stable, and of course got what she wanted without question.

As she had not the slightest intention of returning to Crosscut, it would have been the part of honesty to leave the price of the animal there; but she was no longer worried by her conscience, and she did nothing of the kind.

It was then near midnight, but Crosscut appeared to be as wide awake as ever.

So she did not venture into the main street; but, after mounting the horse atop of her saddle-bags, stole off across lots, so to speak, and got out of the town without exciting any observation.

Once clear of the lights and the houses, she struck off at an easy canter toward the west, following the stage road that led to Grass Valley.

But she did not go to Grass Valley, nor did she follow the stage road for many miles.

What she chiefly desired was to keep clear of towns and villages and all manner of settlements.

The desire that was of next importance was to find Blant Suffield, and to that end it was necessary to search for him in his various haunts.

She showed a knowledge of his hiding-places and of the country that might well be termed extraordinary in a woman, and that could only be accounted for by previous intimate acquaintance with the man and his ways.

The night was not very dark when she left the stage road, the sky being clear, and the stars and a young moon giving light enough for ordinary traveling.

She struck across the plain confidently enough, and did not halt or hesitate until she reached the hills beyond.

Then her task became more difficult, and yet she picked her way through the obstructions like a person who knew what she was doing and where she was going.

She looked in at two of Blant Suffield's haunts, but did not find him, and met no person anywhere.

"He must surely be at the old cabin, if he hasn't left the country," she said, as she urged her horse toward a dark defile that lay before her.

Just before reaching the defile the horse shied, snorting with terror, and bounding backward so that she was nearly thrown from her seat.

The next instant a dark form came flying through the air, and alighted on the ground near her.

She knew from the creature's snarl that it was a panther, and whipped out her pistol and fired at it before it could gather itself together.

Two more shots she fired; but the first happened to be the lucky one, as it entered the beast's eye and pierced its brain.

She put an end to its struggles by emptying the remaining chambers of her revolver into its body.

"Take that, Dan Dillon!" she cried at every shot.

Signs of dawn were visible in the east as she persuaded her horse to pass the dead beast and carry her through the defile, and soon it was day, and then the sun came up and flooded the earth with light.

She rode on until she came to a miner's cabin on the hillside, long since deserted, and she halted and gazed at it, but there was no sign of life there.

Then she hitched her horse in the valley below and climbed up to the cabin, where she listened outside and peeked in through the cracks, but neither saw nor heard anything.

Drawing the revolver from her belt, she pushed open the door and entered boldly.

There was no human life in the cabin, and yet there were evidences of recent occupation.

Blankets were on the broken floor in the corner, and warm ashes covered embers on the hearth, near which were a few cooking utensils that had lately been used, and there were several articles of man's apparel scattered about.

Having satisfied herself that there was no person in the building, the woman examined the various articles closely.

"He has been here," she said. "He was here last night. It is but a little while since he went out. He will soon come back. Oh! I am so sleepy."

She arranged the blankets so as to make for herself a soft couch as possible, and lay down upon them and was soon sound asleep.

She slept as soundly as if there was nothing in the world to trouble her—no losses, no failures, no criminal charges, no fear or care for the future, no disappointments, vexations or anxieties.

More than an hour she had slept there quietly and peacefully, when the door opened and a tall and stalwart man entered the cabin.

Any one who had ever seen him or heard a description of him would at once have recognized big Blant Suffield.

He stooped as he came in, and started when he saw the woman reclining on the couch of blankets.

Then he stopped right there and took off his heavy boots so that he might make no noise to awaken her.

He raked out the embers of the fire, put on a few sticks to kindle it, and went out and got more wood, which speedily began to blaze on the hearth.

Then he proceeded to dress a couple of sage-hens that he had brought in, stripping off the skin with the feathers on it very deftly, as if they had been quails.

When he had cleaned them thoroughly, he cut them up, pulled a bed of coals out on the hearth, and set them to cook.

Either the crackling of the fire, or the savory smell of the broiling birds, awoke the woman, and she started up and stared at him.

"Is that you, Blant?"

"Yes. You may as well get up, old girl. It is breakfast time."

CHAPTER XLI.

SHE WINDS UP HER WORK.

EFFIE SEAVER was obliged to sit up and rub her eyes before she could get them fairly open.

She had been very tired, and had slept so soundly that her senses did not come back to her quickly.

When she was awake her first impulse was to arrange her hair; but she made a poor success of that, lacking the usual appliances of her toilet.

"Better not worry about your looks," remarked the big bandit. "This hotel can't give you any chance to primp, and your breakfast is ready."

"I am glad of that, as I am hungry enough to eat a wolf. What have you got to drink, Blant?"

"Water," he answered, in a tone of disgust.

"Is that all?"

"Well, water is of some use when you can't get anything better."

"I have brought something better."

She opened her saddle-bags, produced the flask of liquor which she had procured in Crosscut, and handed it to him.

He took a hearty drink, and returned it to her, and she followed his example.

"That did me a vast amount of good," said he. "You have earned your breakfast, and I suppose that is the first thing you have earned honestly in a long time, unless it's a hanging."

"Better speak for yourself. You are not the sort of man who is expected to make a fuss about honesty."

"That's a fact, and I am thankful for that drink, and am ready for business now, and the first business is breakfast."

They were both hungry, and, as they ate without stopping to talk, the sage-hens disappeared rapidly, until nothing was left of them but the bones.

Then Suffield lighted a pipe, and posted himself on a block of wood, while she made a seat for herself of the blankets.

"Now you may give an account of yourself," said he. "I suppose you ran away from Crosscut. Did they drive you out?"

"No; I didn't give them the chance."

"Smart girl. Did Dan Dillon and his pards follow you up?"

"Yes; but that was not the worst of it. A friend of his had been on my trail, and had found out a great deal too much. He knew all about the bank business, how you happened to go through the cashier, how you picked up Dan Dillon, and about the Mexican girl, and the whole string of it."

"That was bad."

"But there was worse behind, Blant. Old man Seaver was not dead, after all, and he turned up there with Dan Dillon, and the girl was alive, and she was there, too."

Suffield whistled.

"The girl alive?" he exclaimed. "How did that happen?"

"They picked her up somehow."

"I'm glad of that, anyway. Tell me the whole yarn, Effie. It is as good as a play."

She related the particulars of her interview with Bart Scammell and the others, telling the story in her own way—that is, as much of it as she saw fit to tell—and carefully avoiding any allusion to the discovery of her marital relations with Eugene Thistlewood.

Suffield listened to the account without interrupting her, and smiled sardonically at the finish.

"It takes a woman," he said, "to leave a broad and plain trail that any fool can follow. She don't cover her tracks worth a cent, and never seems to think of the hereafter. As long as she does what she wants to do, and gets what she hankers after, she don't care a continental for the consequences. But the consequences have to come, and that's where she gets left."

"It was luck that turned against me," she protested.

"Luck had much to do with it, I admit; but you deserved all you got, and more. The smartest thing you did was to sneak out of Crosscut. It's the devil's own wonder that they didn't lay you out completely before you could get away."

"Nobody seemed to want to worry me, Blant. The old man took nothing from me that I had, and the others were willing to let me off."

"That's queer. They must have been very much afraid of you, or must have despised you heartily—I can't say which. What are you going to do now?"

"I have come to you, as you see. What are you going to do?"

"I am going to skip this country right away."

"You had better. Dan Dillon said that he was going to get you after awhile."

"He will keep his word if he can. But this

is a big country, and I am likely to get away before he can find me. That reminds me that I must go out and kill some sort of game that I can cook and carry with me, as I won't want to show up at any town or station within many miles of here."

Blant Suffield took his rifle, and left the cabin, saying that he would soon return.

The woman was very restless after he had left her.

She built up the fire, and cowered over it as if she was chilly, though the day was not at all cold.

Then she went outside, looked up and down the valley, and picked up some dry sticks which she brought in and added to the fire, over which she cowered again.

As these employments failed to cheer or comfort her, she had recourse to the flask of whisky which she had brought from Crosscut, and that afforded her so much consolation that she had almost drained it dry when Suffield returned.

It was after noon when he came in, and he brought the hind quarters of an antelope which he had killed and dressed at a little distance from the cabin.

"That will be meat enough to last me awhile," said he. "Where's that bottle of whisky?"

She handed him the flask, and he looked at it with an air of disgust.

"Shoot me if you haven't finished it, or scarcely left a smell! Well, you're a sweet one. Always wanting everything for yourself, as you have ever since I have known you."

"I can get more for you, Blant, as we go along. We had better cook that meat and start."

"Start for where?"

"Wherever you are going to."

"I hope you don't fancy that I am going to take you with me."

"Why, Blant, I do hope that you don't mean to go back on me now. I have put you up to some good things since I came to Crosscut."

"And you ended by breaking me all up in business, getting my men wiped out, and making me skip the country. I tell you I can't afford to be bothered by a woman, as it will be quite as much as I can do to look out for myself. That Dan Dillon is a hound for hunting when he gets his dander up, and he will be hot on my trail, with a pack at his heels."

"I can hide as well as you can, and ride as fast as you can," she protested.

"It won't do, I tell you. You must look out for yourself. I've got too much at stake to run any risks. I carry about me all of that bank man's plunder, as I didn't have a chance to get rid of the securities and divide with the boys before they were wiped out."

"And that makes quite a pile," she suggested, "with the money you got from me."

The temptation was a great one, as it was a small fortune that he carried on his person, and it is reasonable to suppose that the woman began to covet it as soon as he spoke of it.

But the temptation might not have moved her to action, if it had not been for subsequent exciting causes.

The thought that even he was ready to despise and desert her was working on her while he was preparing to cook his meat.

She paced the floor restlessly, and there was a worn and troubled look on her face.

"How old you are getting to be, Effie!" remarked Suffield as he glanced at her.

"Old!" she angrily exclaimed, as she stopped and turned her flashing eyes upon him. "Do you call me old? I was never old to you until you saw the moon-faced fool we stole from Dan Dillon. You seem to have had no fancy for me since you met her."

"That's about the size of it, I admit."

"And you would gladly take her out of the country if she wanted you to."

"You are speaking the truth now."

"But you shall never have the chance, and you shall never call me an old woman again."

When his eyes were turned from her she had drawn and leveled her revolver, and she fired as she spoke.

The bullet struck the big bandit in the breast, and he fell over on the pile of blankets.

As the blood gushed from the wound he struggled to reach his belt of revolvers, which he had laid aside when he began his cooking preparations; but she fired again and again, hitting him twice, and disabling him completely.

CHAPTER XLII.

DAN DILLON'S ABDICATION.

The work was done.

The little woman had made an end of the big man, who had scarcely strength enough to curse her as he writhed on the couch of blankets.

In a few minutes he must breathe his last, and the wealth upon his person would be hers, and then she could whistle at the world.

But there was an unpleasant surprise in store for her. As she stood there with the pistol in her hand, hesitating whether she should send another bullet into the body of the prostrate man, the door of the cabin opened quickly but quietly, and she was seized from behind before she knew what was the matter.

In the start that she made the pistol flew from

her hand, and fell near Blant Suffield, who silently reached for it, and concealed it under a corner of the blanket.

It was Dan Dillon who entered the cabin and seized her, and after him came Bart Scammell, followed by Nat Burnett, Bert Edes and two others.

"We had not expected to find you here, madam," said Dan, as he took the precaution to tie the woman's hands with his handkerchief, to prevent her from doing any further harm.

Her nerve and assurance were equal to the occasion.

"I tracked that man to this place," said she, "and I claim the reward for his capture, if any is offered. He tried to kill me, and I shot him in self-defense."

"She lies!" feebly retorted the bandit. "She is a devil in the shape of a woman. She wanted to leave the country with me, and shot me in cold blood because she wanted to rob me."

"Is that true Suffield?" asked Dan, who had left the woman and approached the pile of blankets.

"It's gospel truth. She won't get my money; but she shall leave the country with me."

He had quietly cocked her revolver under the blanket, and as he spoke he raised it and aimed it at her.

She screamed at the sight of the weapon; but he fired on the instant, with the last exertion of which he was capable.

The dying man's aim was true, and she fell at the report. The bullet had pierced her heart, and death was almost instantaneous!

Blant Suffield fell over and gasped his last breath.

"That is the end of it," said Dan. "She has saved some hangman a job, and they have left this country together. I am afraid it is too easy to guess the country they have gone to. Our work is done."

"Not quite," observed Baby Bart. "We must search for plunder."

The search was surprisingly successful.

On the person of Blant Suffield were found all the securities and valuable papers that had been taken from Dan Dillon's box in the Crosscut bank, together with a large amount of money.

The bodies of the bandit and the woman who had formerly been his wife were buried in one grave near the deserted cabin, and a big heap of stones was piled over them.

As Dan Dillon and his friends rode back to Crosscut, they did not exult over the success of their expedition, realizing the fact that the tragedy which closed it had been beyond their management or control.

But they did inwardly rejoice because that man and that woman would give them no more trouble, and there were other matters that might fairly move them to exultation.

"You are in big luck, Dan," said Baby Bart, "to get back all the plunder that Abijah Binley robbed you of."

"Better than that," responded Dan. "We have got enough to cover the bank's loss and leave a balance which we can divide among the men who have helped us. Then I will have nothing to do but to settle my debts in Crosscut, and I have brought plenty of money from down yonder for that purpose."

"You have no debts in Crosscut," observed Bart.

"I know that I was in debt when I left the town."

"They are wiped out. I have been attending to business lately, for self and pard, and have squared you with the bank and settled everything I could hear of."

"Have you done that, Bart? Well, you will do to tie to, and no mistake. But I thought before I left that you had gone back on me."

"It was that woman, Dan, who turned my head, and then whisky drove me wild. But I pulled out of that, and tried to make what I might call an atonement. There is a saloon in Crosscut ready for you, pard, whenever you choose to step into it."

"I shall be sorry to disappoint you, old man, since you have proved your friendship for me so fully; but the truth is that I have decided to quit that business, and to leave Crosscut for good. I am to be married, you know, and my wife has an interest in a valuable gold find down yonder, as well as in her father's ranch, and those matters will be as much as I can attend to. Besides, I have no longer any fancy for the kind of life I led in Crosscut."

Bart was disconsolate, and vowed that he saw nothing for him to do but to follow his friend.

Since Dan disappeared from Crosscut the Opera House had been completed.

The fact may be worth noting that in all small towns the theater is called an Opera House.

The Crosscutters, ashamed of themselves for the manner in which they had treated Dan Dillon, and anxious to make what Bart Scammell might call an atonement, could think of nothing better than to give him a grand "reception" in the new Opera House.

He was quite unwilling to have that honor thrust upon him, but could not refuse the compliment that was tendered him by his repentant fellow-citizens.

The reception was an immense affair.

No expense was spared to make it a success, and all the eloquence of Crosscut was let loose, and Zanita was praised and congratulated and showered with presents, and Hannibal Artaxerxes Tipton reveled in the report that he made for the next issue of the *Crusher*.

Dan was obliged to make a speech, and he did it very neatly. Referring as lightly as possible to recent events, he thanked the Crosscutters for their kindness, formally abdicated the kingship which he had held by their courtesy, and bade them an affectionate farewell.

After the reception he was quietly married to Zanita, and they left Crosscut for the Grand River country.

He organized a mining company, with Bart Scammell at its head, which profitably worked the rich deposit in Secret Gulch.

For himself and wife he took up a tract of land near Nat Burnett's, upon which they established themselves, and where they made the wilderness to blossom as the rose.

Josiah Seaver sold his ranch near Crosscut, and started a new one not far from Dan Dillon's tract, so that he might be near Zanita.

Bert Edes became the old man's foreman and general agent, and his fortunes flourished with those of his friends.

THE END.

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